

Contradiction as the cause of change

The final part of Edward Conze's explanation of dialectical materialism*

COMMONSENSE readily agrees to the first three laws of scientific method. [Studying things in their interrelations; studying things in their movements; the unity of opposites.] In the fourth law, however, the common-sense basis is less manifest and perceptible. The recognition of contradictions goes against the grain of practically everything that passed as scientific tradition during the last five centuries. During practically the whole of that time science suffered from having a mechanistic outlook and on the basis of that outlook tried to represent the world as though there were no contradictions in it. It blamed the stupidity of our minds for all those contradictions which it could not fail to notice. It refused to regard contradictions as a normal element of reality. Through thousands of channels this adverse tradition has moulded the mind of everybody and imbued us with a resistance against the scientific conception of the movement of things.

Intellectual and material contradictions
TWO different sorts of contradictions must be distinguished from the very outset, the one intellectual, i.e. in our mind, and the other material, i.e. in concrete reality.

Some ideas or statements are self-contradictory because they are ideas of things which are inherently impossible. Such is the idea of a Jewish Nazi, of a 6-carat diamond priced at 2d by a dealer, of a match which burns with a cold flame, of a sane employer who is prepared to pay wages of any amount. It is an intellectual contradiction to say that beefsteak is not meat, or wheat is not corn. If we say that, we deny to beefsteak and wheat one of their essential qualities and that is a contradiction. Intellectual contradictions should be avoided, being absurd and nonsensical. They are the result and the sign of false thinking.

We assume the presence of a *material* contradiction wherever we observe that something destroys itself, or moves itself, or hinders itself, stands in its own way. A boy should come to dinner. But he remains upstairs, having an outburst of temper. His brother describes his behaviour as follows: "He wants to come downstairs, but he won't let himself". The angry boy is in a state of contradiction; is torn and shaken by contradictory desires.

A material contradiction means that one concrete process contains two mutu-

ally incompatible and exclusive, but nevertheless equally essential and indispensable parts or aspects. The reader who finds this definition rather involved should skip over it and hurry to the examples which will make the thing clear.

Contradiction in nature

IN some instances we can observe that a thing moves and destroys itself. This is the case with radium and uranium which decompose themselves into other elements by a spontaneous radiation and disintegration. Since this disintegration is not due to external causes, but the constitution of radium itself, we would assume the presence of a contradiction in radium. At the moment, however, we are incapable of pointing out what the contradiction is.

We find clearer examples in the life of organisms. Engels pointed out that a living being is at any given moment the same and yet another. He further drew attention to the fact that a living cell continually decomposes and disintegrates itself. Its life consists in that it simultaneously performs two contradictory processes, breaks down and builds itself up again. Recent research has further shown that the chemical products of decomposition are the natural stimulus which keeps life, and the process of building up, going.

Capitalism

IT is, however, in society that the presence of contradictions is most marked. In all stages of history, contradictions have been the ultimate cause of changes in society. We can understand nothing at all of what happens in present-day society without tracing events back to the basic contradiction in capitalism.

The correct explanation of the recurrent economic crises is one of the triumphs of the dialectical method. Orthodox economists are as unable to explain the crises as their employers are to avoid it. They cannot admit the presence of a contradiction which, periodically, tears capitalism to pieces. For this would imply the admission that something is fundamentally wrong with capitalism. In their frantic search for an inoffensive cause of the economic crises they have sometimes suggested sun spots, sometimes they even dare to blame the monetary system, but never the system of production as such.

Capitalism often stands in its own way. In the 19th century, for example, the British capitalists acted without a common plan. Everyone felt compelled to outrun his competitors in profit-making. The British capitalists therefore exported machines abroad. In this way, they destroyed the British monopoly of the world market for industrial goods, and equipped their own competitors. The "depressed areas" are the result of this self-destruction which, however, was inevitable under the system.

Every seven or ten years or so, capitalism stands in its own way — it develops a crisis. In time of crisis, capitalist production is not impeded by any outside force, but by itself. The very development of production on capitalist lines produces a check to this production periodically and with disastrous results for the mass of the population. We thus have here a situation which suggests an underlying contradiction.

What is the basic contradiction in capitalism? What are the two essential but incompatible aspects of capitalist production? They are, co-operative production on the one hand, and private ownership of the means and fruits of production, on the other hand.

Modern production is based on an immense co-operation. Millions of people have to co-operate, in one way or other, in order to produce any commodity, say a piece of soap or of chocolate. On the other hand, the products of this co-operation are owned by a small minority. The work of the millions is carried on for the profit of the few.

It is the most obvious fact about the crisis that we have, on the one hand, large quantities of products which cannot be sold and, on the other hand, large masses of workers who are in need of these same products. The world crisis of 1929 to 1934 forced 25 to 30 million workers to become unemployed in the capitalist countries. The productive capacity of the factories could not be fully utilised. The following table shows the extent to which German factory productive capacity was utilised in recent years:

1929	67.4%
1930	52.2%
1931	44.5%
1932	35.7%

As a result of the contradictory nature of capitalism, production must necessarily, after some time, go beyond the limits of purchasing power. Everything conspires to extend production and to contract the market.

If production were expanded according to a plan, no harm would result. But production is extended by employers who fiercely compete for their share in the market; who, during prosperity, must rush with the products into the market if they do not want to be late. Each capitalist is at the heels of another capitalist. Everybody must take the opportunity as long as it is there. Everybody must produce at top speed, irrespective of the volume of purchasing power, which does not expand so quickly. Soon the market is flooded with products of all kinds and the crash comes.

The market, on the other hand, depends largely on the masses of the population. Of course, there is also a market for machines. But the machines, once bought, produce things to be consumed by the masses. Nobody buys a hot-water-bottle-machine for its beauty. It is bought in order to pro-

* This explanation of dialectical materialism was written in the mid-'30s.

duce hot water bottles, which must be sold to the masses. The purchasing power of the market thus depends mainly on wages and salaries. During prosperity, wages rise, but they are far from rising sufficiently to absorb the growing production. For the output per worker increases much faster than his wages do, even in times of prosperity. The increase in the rate of interest compels the employer to resist further wage demands. The relatively high wages and the fierce competition for the market compel him to introduce new machinery which saves labour and wages, but while it increases production it reduces purchasing power.

It is very nice to advise the employer to pay higher wages in order that he may avoid a crisis. No doubt he would listen to such exhortations, if he were interested in the production of shoes, cotton, machines, etc. But he is interested in the production of profit only. Higher wages are paid at the expense of his profit and thus diminish his interest in producing anything at all. During a crisis, the surplus goods which have been stored up must first be sold. Prices fall. Between 1929 and 1933, wholesale prices in the main industrial countries decreased annually by between 30 and 35 per cent. It took three years, from 1929 to 1932, for the stocks of agricultural produce and industrial raw materials to diminish seriously. After this has been achieved, we have the paradox that a crisis which was the result of low purchasing power can in the end be overcome only by raising prices and lowering wages. These two operations diminish purchasing power but they raise the rate of profit which provides an incentive for resuming production.

The art of politics consists in solving those contradictions with which reality present us. To find a solution to the contradiction of capitalism is the great issue of today.

A permanent solution is possible only by destroying one of the two sides of the contradiction. The only permanent cure which keeps for the working class the fruits of technical progress consists in the abolition of private profit.

The private ownership of the means and fruits of production must be replaced by their common ownership and democratic control. ■

Class legacy

A dying socialist to his son

"Thy father is a poor man," mark well what that may mean,
On the tablets of thy memory that truth write bright and clean,
Thy father's lot it was to toil from earliest boyhood on,
And know his latent energies for a master's profit drawn;
Or else, ill-starred, to wander round and huxter-like to vend
His precious store of brain and brawn for all whom fate may send,
Across his path with gold enough to purchase Labour's power
To turn it into gold again, and fructify the hour
With sweat and blood of toiling slaves, like unto us my son;
Aye, through our veins since earliest days, 'tis poor man's blood has run.

Yes, son of mine, since History's dawn two classes stand revealed,
The Rich and Poor, in bitterest war, by deadliest hatred steeled,
The one, incarnate greed and crime, disdainful honest toil,
Had grasped man's common birthright and treasure house, the soil.

And issuing forth from walls of stone, high over cliff and pass,
With sword in hand would gather in the tribute for his class,
And grimmest emblems of their rule flaunting to human ken,
The pit to drown our women, the gibbet for our men.
Stood, aye, beside their fortresses; and underneath the moat
Tier under tier of noisome cells for those the tyrant smote.
Thumbscrew and rack and branding rod, and each device of Hell
Perverted genius could devise to torture men to sell
(For brief respite from anguish dire to end their wretched lives)
The secrets of their comradeship, the honour of their wives.

"The past?" Ah, boy, the method's past; the deed is still the same,
And robbery is robbery yet, though cloaked in gentler name.
Our means of life are still usurped, the rich man still is lord,
And prayers and cries for justice still meet one reply — the sword!
Though hypocrites for rich man's gold may tell us we are free,
And oft extoll in speech and print our vaunted liberty.
But freedom lies not in a name, and he who lacks for bread,
Must have that bread tho' he should give his soul for it instead.
And we, who live by Labour, know that while they rule we must
Sell Freedom, brain, and limb, to win for us and ours a crust.

The robbers made our fathers slaves, then

chained them to the soil,
For a little longer chain — a wage — we must exchange our toil.
But open force gave way to fraud, and force again behind
Prepares to strike if fraud should fail to keep man deaf and blind.
Our mothers see their children's limbs they fondled as they grew,
And doted on, caught up to make for rich men profits new.
Whilst strong men die for lack of work, and cries of misery swell,
And women's souls in cities' streets creep shuddering to hell.
These things belong not to the past, but to the present day,
And they shall last till in our wrath we sweep them all away.

Treasure ye in your inmost heart this legacy of hate,
For those who on the poor man's back have climbed to high estate,
The lords of land and capital, the slave lords of our age,
Who of this smiling earth of ours have made for us a cage.
Where golden bars fetter men's souls, and noble thoughts do flame
To burn us with their vain desires, and virtue yields to shame.
Each is your foe, foe to your class, of human rights, the foe,
Be it your thought by day and night to work their overthrow;
And howsoe'er you earn your wage, and where-soe'er you go,
Be it beneath the tropic heat or mid the northern snow.
Or closely pent in factory walls or burrowing in the mine,
Or scorching in the furnace hell of steamers 'cross the brine.
Or on the railroad's shining track you guide the flying wheel,
Or clamouring up on buildings high to weld their frames of steel.
Or use the needle or the type, the hammer or the pen,
Have you one thought, one speech alone to all your fellow-men.
The men and women of your class, tell them their wrongs and yours,
Plant in their hearts that hatred deep that suffers and endures.
And treasuring up each deed of wrong, each scornful word and look,
Inscribe it in the memory, as others in a book.
And wait and watch through toiling years the ripening of time,
Yet deem to strike before that hour were worse than folly — crime.

This be your task, oh, son of mine, the rich man's hate to brave,
And consecrate your noblest part to rouse each fellow-slave,
To speed the day the world awaits when Labour long opprest,
Shall rise and strike for Freedom true, and from the tyrants wrest —
The power they have abused so long. Oh, ever glorious deed!
The crowning point of history, yet, child, of bitterest need.

James Connolly