

(Samizdat) LENIN 150

"But those who struggled for the good of people
Will never die, they will burn like candles."

– Joomart Bokonbaev (1910-1944), *To N.K. Krupskaya*, 1939
Translated by Charles Buxton and Aisuluu Kokoyeva

Lenin150 (Samizdat) aims to contribute to the re-kindling of the communist attractor by engaging, in the spirit of critical solidarity, with Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov in the year of his 150th anniversary. Conceived out of the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan, the book brings together contributions from all continents, ranging in style from the academic to the lyrical. As such, these compelling, and in some cases absolutely urgent, appropriations of (the spectre of) Lenin aspire to be of considerable use-value for the struggles ahead.

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Hjalmar Jorge Joffe-Eichhorn (ed.)
Patrick Anderson (language ed.)
Johann Salazar (photo.)

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Editor: Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn
Language editor: Patrick Anderson
Photography & Cover design: Johann Salazar

Contact: lenin150@posteo.de

First printing: August 2020

ISBN: 978-3-00-066212-6

Print:
ac europrint gmbh,
Theodorstr. 41D,
22761 Hamburg

Printed in Germany

A CIP catalogue record is available from the British Library

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9. Lenin and Non-Antagonistic Contradictions

Roland Boer

The category of non-antagonistic contradictions arose from the practical experience of constructing socialism, initially in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, and then in China, especially through the impetus of Mao Zedong and later in the context of the socialist project of ‘Reform and Opening-up’ led by Deng Xiaoping. Can earlier evidence of this significant theoretical and practical development be found? To answer this question, the following commences with the notion of antagonistic contradictions in the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin. Then, we will look at the beginnings of a theory of non-antagonistic contradictions in Lenin in the years after 1917. Finally, I deal with the seeds sown by Lenin’s thinking, some of which would bear fruits only considerably later.

From Antagonistic Contradictions ...

A crucial distinction is our starting point: before and after a communist revolution. As Lenin and Mao observed, while gaining power through proletarian revolution is readily achievable, constructing socialism once in power is infinitely more difficult. Although there are many dimensions to this distinction, here my concern is with the implications for contradiction analysis. Before a revolution, Marxist analysis focuses on the rise of antagonistic contradictions. As Marx famously stated in his preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*: “The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form [*letzte antagonistische Form*] of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals’ social conditions of existence – but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism [*die materiellen Bedingungen zur Lösung dieses Antagonismus*].”^{1,2} Marx refers here to the process leading up to a proletarian revolution, in which antagonism reaches its apex between and within the forces and relations of production. He concludes his statement with the observation that once a proletarian revolution has arrived, the “prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.”³

1 Marx 1859b: 101, and Marx 1859a: 263-64.

2 In his revised summation of the entire process in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels would make the point even more clearly (Engels 1880b: 579-80, and Engels 1880a: 324-25).

3 Marx 1859b: 101, and Marx 1859a: 264.

Closer to the revolutionary moment and the reality of proletarian power is Lenin's extraordinary rediscovery of the ruptural dialectic of revolutionary action. Lenin had already engaged in periods of extensive study of Hegel from 1894, when we find the emergence of a dual tendency, one moving in a more mechanistic and the other in a more ruptural direction.⁴ It is not my task here to analyse this complex and even dialectical relationship between the two tendencies, since I have done so elsewhere.⁵ Instead, my focus is on Lenin's retreat in 1914 to the library in Berne, Switzerland, in order to understand why the Second International had failed to unite workers across borders and oppose the recently declared imperialist war. His study ranged across many sources, but the key lay in rediscovering⁶ the ruptural dimension of Hegel's dialectic, which he read in a Marxist framework.⁷ Lenin realised that there had been an overemphasis on the objective historical process, according to which one had to allow and even enable the bourgeois revolution (1905 in Russia) to achieve maturity before a proletarian revolution could arise: only when the objective contradictions of capitalism had unfolded over the long term and risen to a crescendo would a revolutionary party be able to seize the moment. This reading of Marxist dialectics was particularly noticeable in Plekhanov's works,⁸ which influenced not a few Mensheviks and even some Bolsheviks. For Lenin, however, such an approach implied capitulation to the given conditions, and the diminution of Marxist analysis to a mere seeking to understand the objective conditions.

While this concern with analysing objective conditions is of course necessary, it is also one-sided, in that it casts aside the subjective dimension of changing the world: understanding requires a necessary process of abstraction, during which it is realised that the subject is an integral part of the world being studied; subjective and objective factors are thus intimately entwined.⁹ One is inescapably part of the world, just as the world is part of one's consciousness. However, this also entails that one is not merely determined by objective conditions but can act to change them. "Consciousness," writes Lenin, "not only reflects the objective world, but creates it [...] i.e., that

4 Lenin 1984a, and Lenin 1994b.

5 See Boer 2015.

6 Contra Anderson 1995: 23-25.

7 Lenin 1914b, and Lenin 1914a.

8 See especially Plekhanov 1907.

9 Note especially: "The abstraction of *matter*, of a *law* of nature, the abstraction of *value*, etc., in short, all scientific (correct, serious, not absurd) abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly and *completely*;" "The formation of (abstract) notions and operations with them already includes the idea, conviction, consciousness of the law-governed character to the world ... the first and simplest formation of notions (judgements, syllogisms, etc.) already denotes man's ever deeper cognition of the objective connection of the world." (Lenin 1914b: 152-53, 160-61, and Lenin 1914a: 171, 178-79)

the world does not satisfy man and man decides to change it by his activity."¹⁰ It follows that revolutionary practice is not merely concerned with the seizure of power but is even more importantly focused on the transformation of the objective world, of economics, society and culture. If human activity is able to create for itself an objective picture of the world, then such activity also "changes external actuality, abolishes its determinateness." How is this achieved? By the revolutionary agent's conscious act, which can abolish the socio-economic foundations of the world as they are known and recreate them in a new way. Or, in Hegelian terms, such a socialist world can be made "as being in and for itself," as "objectively true."¹¹ More concretely, this means that a communist party can intervene in the apparently objective course of history and create it anew. In Russia, this meant seizing leadership of the process of the bourgeois revolution and turning it towards proletarian revolution.

Lenin began advocating these insights in his extraordinary *Letters from Afar* and the *April Theses*,¹² which would – in the face of initial opposition even within the Bolshevik Party – lead in only a few years to the October Revolution. In terms of contradiction analysis leading up to a revolution, this approach necessitated not only a thoroughly dialectical understanding of object and subject in epistemology (through abstraction and engagement), but also an active campaign to exacerbate the objective contradictions through subjective revolutionary intervention. Further, it was the key to Lenin's idea of the "weakest link" in the capitalist chain, through which a relatively undeveloped country would actually become the first where a communist revolution could succeed. In light of these momentous (re-)discoveries, it is no wonder Lenin exclaimed:

It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!!¹³

... to Non-Antagonistic Contradictions

Thus far, my concern has been with contradiction analysis leading up to a communist revolution, when contradictions intensify to the point of extreme

10 Lenin 1914b: 194-195, and Lenin 1914a: 212-213.

11 Lenin 1914b: 198-99, and Lenin 1914a: 217-18.

12 See Lenin 1917c, Lenin 1917a, Lenin 1917b, and Lenin 1917d.

13 Lenin 1914b: 162, and Lenin 1914a: 180.

antagonism, in terms of the forces and relations of production and of class conflict. But what happens after a successful revolution, when the arduous process of constructing socialism begins? A late and brief guide is provided by Lenin in a marginal note to his reading of Bukharin's *The Economics of the Transition Period*.¹⁴ Lenin writes: "Antagonism and contradiction are not at all the same thing. Under socialism, the first will disappear, the second will remain."¹⁵ Although written in 1920, the notes on Bukharin were first published only in 1929. The timing was happenstance, but they would have profound repercussions into the 1930s and beyond, when the category of non-antagonistic contradictions began to be elaborated.

Apart from this observation, Lenin had relatively little to say on contradictions under socialism, not least because of the relatively brief years he had left – under very difficult circumstances – after the October Revolution.¹⁶ However, there is a brief fascinating reflection on the role of trade unions during the transition period, in which Lenin identifies a number of contradictions: between persuasion-education and coercion; between protecting workers' interests and wielding state power – through the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' – for the construction of socialism; between adapting to the masses and seeking to lift the masses out of prejudice and backwardness. Are these contradictions a passing phase, especially in the context of the New Economic Policy? They are no accident, observes Lenin, for they "will persist for several decades ... as long as survivals of capitalism and small production remain, contradictions between them and the young shoots of socialism are inevitable throughout the social system."¹⁷ Clearly, Lenin saw such contradictions as a long-term reality during the initial stage of the construction of socialism – the persistent relics of a capitalist mode of production and its attendant social forms, which would be overcome only with the advent of communism itself.¹⁸

14 See Bukharin 1920a, and Bukharin 1920b.

15 Lenin 1920: 391.

16 A letter to Gorky on 16 November, 1909, observes in a lapidary manner: "Believe me, the philosopher Hegel was right: life proceeds by contradictions, and living contradictions are so much richer, more varied and deeper in content than they may seem at first sight to a man's mind." (Lenin 1909a: 219, and Lenin 1909b: 403). And at the 10th congress of R.C.P. (B.) in 1921, Lenin spoke not only of managing the contradiction between workers and peasants, but also of "smoothing out" the antagonisms among the peasantry (Lenin 1921b: 59-60, and Lenin 1921a: 215-16).

17 Lenin 1921b: 349-50, and Lenin 1921a: 382-83.

18 This assumption was of course due to Marx's brief reflections concerning what he called an initial stage of communism, in which 'bourgeois right' would continue for some time, and Lenin's detailed exegesis of this text in terms of the stages of socialism and communism (Marx 1875b: 13-15, and Marx 1875a: 85-87; Lenin 1917a: 86-102, and Lenin 1917e: 464-479).

Contradictions after Lenin

Obviously, these initial observations concerning non-antagonistic contradictions by Lenin are somewhat sparse. Overworked by the immense tasks of restoring even the basics of economic and social life after the October Revolution, dealing with the pressures and destruction caused by the Civil War, and beset by ill health resulting from a series of strokes only a few years into the construction of socialism, he had precious little time to think through the implications.

The task would fall to his successors, particularly during the immensely creative period of the 1930s, as the results of the socialist offensive – break-neck industrialisation and the collectivisation of agriculture – became clear. In this context, we begin to see the idea of non-antagonistic contradictions arising in response to three practical realities: the flowering of minority nationalities under the world's first comprehensive set of 'preferential policies' for such minorities; the development of class relations among workers and collective farmers; and, most importantly, the continuation in a very new context of contradictions between the forces and relations of production.

In this situation, we begin to see the clear development of a greater understanding of non-antagonistic contradictions. For example, in *A Textbook of Marxist Philosophy* from the 1930s, we find the following explanation in reference to the above-mentioned observation by Lenin concerning antagonism and contradiction:

If in developed socialism there were *no* contradictions – contradictions between productive forces and relations in production, between production and demand, no contradictions in the development of technique, etc. – then the development of socialism would be impossible, then instead of movement we would have stagnation. Only in virtue of the internal contradictions of the socialist order can there be development from one phase to another and higher order.¹⁹

At about the same time, a very long entry was published in the first edition of the *Bolshaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya*, which provides not only a careful survey of the history of dialectics, but also of the nature of dialectical materialism and the development of non-antagonistic contradictions under socialism.²⁰

19 Shirokov and Aizenberg 1937: 175.

20 See Mitin et al. 1935.

It was precisely this material, along with a flurry of translated works by Marx, Engels, Lenin and others, that Mao Zedong and his comrades would study during the immensely creative period in Yan'an in 1935-1937.²¹ This was the period after the Long March and just before the Anti-Japanese War began in earnest: a time for in-depth study, late night discussion groups, lectures and writings that would eventually provide the basis for the New China. It would lead not only to the initial lectures by Mao Zedong on dialectical materialism, but above all to the foundational essay 'On Contradiction' and its follow-up after the Liberation of China, 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People.'²² The analysis of these developments is another task, but we can trace them to seeds first sown by Lenin. Indeed, these seeds can still invigorate our struggles today and tomorrow, whether in seeking the path to a proletarian revolution or in the arduous task of constructing socialism.

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