

Antagonistic and Non-Antagonistic Contradictions

by Ai Siqi

This is a selection from Ai Siqi's book Lecture Outline on Dialectical Materialism, Beijing, 1957. This book was translated into a number of languages. The selection describes the concept of non-antagonistic contradiction as expounded in several works by Mao Zedong. This translation is based Chinese text published in Ai Siqi's Complete Works [艾思奇全书], Beijing: People's publishing House, 2006, vol. 6, pp. 832-836.

[832] 5. Antagonistic and non-antagonistic forms of struggle

The struggle of opposites is absolute, but this principle does not at all exclude diversity of struggle forms and methods of resolution. On the contrary, forms of struggle and methods of resolving contradictions must have various manifestations, depending on the quality of the contradiction and all kinds of different circumstances. One of the characteristics of formalism¹ is to grasp some one kind of struggle form and method of resolving contradictions in a one-sided way, and regard it as a thing which is absolutely impossible to change, thus committing subjectivist errors.

The forms of struggle and methods of resolving contradictions in the oppositions inside natural things differ from the forms of struggle and the methods of resolving contradictions in opposite social phenomena. In the contradictions of social phenomena, there are also many kinds of diversity, and the methods of resolving these opposites and the forms of struggle also depend on locality, time, and differing conditions, and there are many diverse kinds change. In real revolutionary struggle, Marxism-Leninism must be adept at judging different situations, adopting different forms of struggle and different methods for resolving contradictions which are

encountered in our work. It cannot use one fixed kind of form and tie itself to one rigid method, and in this way, it is possible to grasp revolution in a comparatively successful way, and lead towards victory. For example, in order to eliminate capitalism, our Chinese method is not to use a form of great force to expropriate the means of production, but mainly to adopt the form of peaceful remolding to redeem them.

In the various sorts and varieties of struggle forms, two different forms of struggle should be especially studied, antagonistic and non-antagonistic forms. The antagonistic form of struggle is manifested in the form of external conflict of material forces. "Everything that has existed in the natural world must ultimately adopt the form of external conflict to go beyond resolution of past contradictions and produce new appearances of things" ("On Contradiction"), and all are expressions of antagonistic contradictions.

As for non-antagonistic forms, none of them express external forms of struggle. Therefore, antagonism is one form of the struggle of contradictions, and is not the only [833] form. To regard all struggle as antagonistic is the childish viewpoint of "left" adventurism. Antagonism and non-antagonism are two different forms of struggle, and the quality of the contradiction is antagonistic or non-antagonistic, depending on specific conditions which provide these two different qualities and

¹ Formalism is a kind of thinking that emphasizes form in a one-sided way, regardless of real content, or emphasizes the appearance of something without analyzing its essential nature.--ed.

processes of the development of contradictions.

"Antagonistic contradiction" indicates the kind of contradiction in which it is possible for the character of an external clash to burst out between the two opposite sides, and consequently the resolution of this type of contradiction must be mainly through the form of external conflict. The relation between the opposite sides of a non-antagonistic contradiction, therefore, does not contain the factor of needing to erupt into external conflict. Therefore the resolution of such a contradiction does not have to pass through the form of external conflict. Antagonistic contradictions, for example, the class contradictions of exploiter and exploited inside class society, have an antagonistic character because of the terrible conflict in the relation of the economic position of the two sides.

As Comrade Mao Zedong has said: "The contradictions of capitalist society show violent antagonism and conflict, show violent class struggle, and that kind of contradiction cannot possibly be resolved through the capitalist system itself, but only socialist revolution can also resolve them." ("On the question of the correct handling of contradictions among the people") In international relations, the contradiction between imperialism and the people of the whole world and oppressed nations also has an antagonistic nature.

In non-antagonistic contradictions, for example, the contradiction between the working class and the peasantry, the economic position of both sides is not one of terrible basic conflict. On the contrary, their basic interests are identical, so this kind of contradiction does not have an antagonistic character. It is ordinarily said that contradictions between the enemy and us have an antagonistic character, and contradictions among the people, among the working people, do not have an antagonistic character.

In addition to antagonism, the contradiction between bourgeoisie and the working class has a non-antagonistic aspect. This contradiction is originally

antagonistic, but because the working class has adopted suitable policies and methods of struggle, and also because under the regime of people's democratic dictatorship of the working class, capitalist elements opposed to the socialist transformation ordinarily do not resist firmly, this antagonistic contradiction can transform into a non-antagonistic contradiction. On the basis of different qualities of contradictions, as well as different developmental conditions of contradictions and adopting different forms of struggle to resolve contradictions, a prerequisite for the correct direction of practical action is guaranteed.

[834] To study antagonistic and non-antagonistic forms of struggle, it is necessary to pay attention to the relation and mutual transformation of both sides. In their resolution process antagonistic contradictions cannot avoid the need to take on some kind of antagonistic struggle form (the antagonistic form also has various sorts and varieties, like the antagonistic form of a bomb burst, military antagonism, political conflict, etc.), but under certain development conditions, patterns of non-antagonistic struggle forms can also arise (like the proletariat of a capitalist country, which, under certain conditions takes part in parliamentary struggle and some legal open struggle. Naturally, even this kind of struggle can often include the form of external conflict), the contradiction of New China's bourgeoisie and proletariat is a contradiction among the people which contains a class contradiction.

The CPC made great efforts to use the method of criticism to resolve this contradiction. But this contradiction originally had an antagonistic character, and therefore, in order to resolve it, the pattern of the struggle form it took on still unavoidable needed to contain an antagonistic aspect. The "54" struggle² was once an important period of struggle, even if

² "The 54 struggle" means the May 4th Movement, an important anti-imperialist political and cultural movement that began in China on May 4th, 1919, as a protest against the Treaty of Versailles.--ed.

the socialist transformation of capitalist industry had not previously been basically completed. In the present struggle, begun by the bourgeoisie, which has made a furious political and economic assault against proletarian leadership, if the working class reaches out to the broad masses in order to beat off this attack, antagonism can also arise. This present struggle, with regard to its focal point, will be said to move toward having an antagonistic form. Still, because the vast majority of China's national bourgeoisie is a petty bourgeoisie with extremely weak economic power, because they also have anti-imperialist patriotic demands, because they join the working class in a long-term alliance, and because in New China they are led by the working class, therefore, even in the struggle of the "three-anti" and "five-anti" campaigns,³ the working class also was able to focus the struggle (as a struggle against grossly illegal accounts) and exclude the adoption of an antagonistic form. It also generously came to use a non-antagonistic form of struggle of combining persuasion and education. That is to say, this also had a non-antagonistic aspect.

After the "three antis" and "five antis," in the high tide of the socialization of industry and commerce, the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie mainly undertook to adopt the non-antagonistic form of struggle of persuasion and education. Under proletarian dictatorship, China aims at the socialist transformation of the national bourgeoisie, and realizes the peaceful road. But this kind of peaceful [835] road is certainly not a path without struggle, but is from beginning to

end permeated by many paths of struggle. Therefore, it is called the peaceful road only because the struggle of the contradiction is not manifested in violent antagonism. Moreover, in all struggles every effort is made to strengthen the revolutionary united front of the broad masses of the people, and to avoid the rupture of the united front. Here the theory of the peaceful road is definitely not equivalent to a struggle form theory, but is merely one non-antagonistic form. In the course of peaceful development, there are both antagonistic forms and non-antagonistic forms, and in decisive struggle, antagonistic forms still rise to the focal point of action under the most important conditions. Here it is necessary to pay attention to antagonistic contradictions which transform into non-antagonistic contradictions.

As Comrade Mao Zedong said in "On the correct handling of contradictions among the people": "Between the working class and the national bourgeoisie there is a contradiction of exploiter and exploited, which originally was an antagonistic contradiction. But in our country's concrete conditions, these two classes' antagonistic contradiction, if it is handled appropriately, can be transformed into a non-antagonistic contradiction, and this contradiction can be resolved by peaceful methods. If we handle it improperly, and do not adopt the policy toward the national bourgeoisie of unity, criticism and education, the then national bourgeoisie may not accept this policy of ours, and then contradiction between the working class and the national bourgeoisie can turn into a contradiction between ourselves and the enemy. "Our party's policy is to handle the contradiction of the bourgeoisie and the working class as a contradiction among the people, and this is just to say to adopt the policy unity, criticism, education about them. Because of the correctness of our policy about the correct handling of contradictions, the manifestation of antagonism of the contradiction is eventually a small, and in many cases, it is non-antagonistic.

³ The "three anti" and "five anti" campaigns were initiated by the Communist Party of China in the early 1950s. The three antis opposed corruption, waste, and bureaucracy. The five-anti campaign opposed bribery, theft of state property, tax evasion, cheating on government contracts, and stealing state economic information. —ed.

In non-antagonistic contradictions, using an antagonistic form of resolution can and should be avoided, but in some circumstances, (for instance, at times mistaken handling and unjustifiable subjective errors in resolving contradictions among the people, perhaps a loss of vigilance, lowering one's guard carelessly, etc., the effects of hostile classes, and so on), also can often develop an antagonistic form, so much that the quality of the contradiction is made to change from non-antagonism into antagonism. But this certainly cannot become the main situation. Therefore, the quality of a contradiction in certain conditions can be transformed, an antagonistic contradiction can transform into a non-antagonistic contradiction, and the converse can happen as well. Basic changes of condition can happen in antagonistic [836] or non-antagonistic contradictions, and antagonistic and non-antagonistic forms of struggle patterns naturally require mutual transformation.

Comrade Mao Zedong, in "On Contradiction" already pointed out that according to this principle, the interior which was referred to, the party's internal struggle, turns into a situation of struggle outside the party, which is precisely an example of a non-antagonistic contradiction transforming into an antagonistic contradiction. Because of the change of people's circumstances when capitalist society changes into socialist society, the contradiction of city and countryside is another example of an antagonistic contradiction being transformed into a non-antagonistic contradiction.

In "On the question of the correct handling of contradictions among the people," Comrade Mao Zedong went further and summarized many decades of experience of domestic and international working class revolutionary struggle, especially the experience of the struggle of contradictions among the people and contradictions between ourselves and the enemy since the founding of New China, grasping the above-mentioned principle in an even more objective and developed way. The development of this is a major

contribution to Marxist-Leninist philosophy, and from now on it will guide China's socialist construction in a comparatively smooth way, rapidly moving towards triumph.

Comrade Mao Zedong said: "We should study the universality and the timing of the struggle character of contradictions, and must pay attention to the distinctive forms of struggle of different kinds of contradiction." ("On Contradiction"). That is to say that in practical work, which is the occasion of the question of the resolution of contradictions, we must pay attention to their differing character and specific developmental conditions, and become good at adopting different forms of struggle.

On one side, the methods for resolving contradictions among the people cannot be used to resolve contradiction between ourselves and the enemy, and on the other side, it is also necessary to avoid mistakenly adopting antagonistic forms of struggle. At the moment of resolution of an antagonistic contradiction, besides needing to adopt certain antagonistic forms of struggle, it is still necessary to be good at using non-antagonistic forms of struggle under some possible circumstances. In order to study the question of struggle character of opposites at different times, we must pay attention to a single fundamental principle.