

Nick Knight's Discussion of Mao's Supposed Rejection of the Concept of the "Negation of the Negation"

[This is a section from the introductory chapter of Nick Knight's book, *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism: Writings on Philosophy, 1937* (M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990), a book which consists mostly of Mao's own philosophical writings. A couple clarifying additions have been inserted in brackets. –Ed.]

The laws of dialectics and the "negation of the negation"

Another very significant example of this influence which can be drawn from [Mao's essay] *Dialectical Materialism* and subsequent writings is Mao's reference to and utilization of the so-called "basic laws of materialist dialectics". Mao detailed these as follows in *Dialectical Materialism*:

The law of the unity of contradictions; the law of the transformation of quality into quantity and vice versa; the law of the negation of the negation.⁵⁶

The first of these "basic laws", the law of the unity of contradictions (or opposites), was (following the precedent established by orthodox Marxist philosophy) to become the most significant philosophical category in Mao's thought. While Mao had employed the concept of contradiction in writings prior to 1936,⁵⁷ his acceptance of this basic law in *Dialectical Materialism* and his lengthy elaboration of it in *On Contradiction* established the basis for his continued and increasing use of it. Indeed, from 1937 on, it is very clear that this law had become for Mao more than *primus inter pares* ["first among equals"], and constituted the most fundamental of all laws in Marxism. For example, the opening sentence of *On Contradiction* states: "The law of contradiction in things, that is, the law of the unity of opposites, is the basic law (*zui genben de fazhe*) of materialist dialectics".⁵⁸ And some twenty years later, in his speech "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People", Mao was to reiterate the significance of the law of the unity of opposites:

Marxist philosophy holds that the law of the unity of opposites is the fundamental law (*genben guli*) of the universe. This law operates universally, whether in the natural world, in human society, or in man's thinking. Between the opposites in a contradiction there is at once unity and struggle, and it is this that impels things to move and change. Contradictions exist everywhere, but their nature differs in accordance with the different nature of different things. In any given thing, the unity of opposites is conditional, temporary and transitory, and hence relative, whereas the struggle of opposites is absolute. Lenin gave a very clear exposition of this law.⁵⁹

Mao's writings of the 1950s and 1960s are replete with references to this "most basic law", and he employed it not only in an abstract philosophical manner, but in analysis of social and political realities.⁶⁰

Mao's derivation of the concept of the unity of opposites from orthodox Soviet Marxist philosophy was to have a profound impact on the subsequent development of his philosophical thought. As indicated in the quote given immediately above, Mao refers to and draws on Lenin's exposition of the law of the unity of opposites in elaboration and application of his own position. Both in this source, and in *On Contradiction*, Mao was to draw heavily on the fragments on philosophy which came to be incorporated in Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*. In these fragments, in particular "On the Question of Dialectics", the dialectical conception of the unity of opposites is expounded with considerable force, a factor which suggested to Mao its preeminence as the "most basic law" of Marxist philosophy. For example, in "On the Question of Dialectics", Lenin states:

The identity of opposites (it would be more correct perhaps, to say their "unity"—although the difference between the terms identity and unity is not particularly important here. In a certain sense both are correct) is the recognition (discovery) of the contradictory, mutually *exclusive*, opposite tendencies in *all* phenomena and processes of nature (*including* mind and society). The condition for the knowledge of all processes of the world in their "*self-movement*", their spontaneous development, in their real life, is the knowledge of them as a unity of opposites.⁶¹

Moreover, in this as in other aspects of his philosophical writing, Lenin draws heavily on Engels to legitimize his own position. In both *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels had referred to the ubiquity of contradictions, pointing out that a dialectical conception of reality which considers "things in their motion, their change, their life, their reciprocal influence" immediately becomes "involved in contradictions".⁶² In *Anti-Dühring*, Engels stresses this aspect of dialectics:

If simple mechanical change of place contains a contradiction, this is even truer of the higher forms of motion of matter, and especially of organic life and its development... Life is therefore also a contradiction which is present in things and processes themselves, and which constantly asserts and resolves itself...⁶³

The view that the unity of opposites constituted the most fundamental law of dialectics was thus well established in Marxist philosophy prior to the 1930s, and the Soviet texts on philosophy which Mao was to draw on so heavily in his own writings on dialectical materialism were to further reinforce the centrality of this law. For example, the text by Mitin and others entitled *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* referred to the law of the unity of opposites as the "fundamental law (*jiben faze*) of materialist dialectics".⁶⁴ Similarly, Li Da's *Shehuixue dagang* described this law as the "basic law" (*genben faze*) of dialectics which incorporated all other laws, including the law of the "negation of the negation".⁶⁵ Mao could thus call on a well-established body of philosophical thought to assert the law of the unity of opposites to be the "most basic law" of materialist dialectics. It has been suggested, however, that evidence of Mao's divergence from orthodoxy is provided demonstration through his elevation of this law at the expense of the other two; indeed, both Western⁶⁶ and Chinese⁶⁷ scholars have argued that Mao eventually came to reject one of the three laws of dialectical materialism, that of the "negation of the negation". Let us pause to consider this charge, for it bears on the proposition being advanced here that categories of Soviet Marxist philosophy did constitute a significant and persistent influence on Mao's philosophical thought. If it is possible to find in Mao's subsequent writings a rejection of one of the

philosophical laws embraced in his *Lecture Notes on Dialectical Materialism*, it could betoken a significant change of direction in Mao's thought and cast doubt on the degree of influence which Soviet philosophical categories exerted.⁶⁸

On 18 August 1964, Mao held an informal conversation on various aspects of philosophy with several old comrades. Although it is not certain how many were present at this talk on philosophy, it appears that the group was a small one; only three other persons are actually identified as being in attendance with Mao—Kang Sheng, Chen Boda, and Lu Ping. In the course of the conversation, Mao made a number of provocative statements, but we will restrict our attention here to just one of these: his apparent rejection of the law of the “negation of the negation”. On being asked by Kang Sheng if the Chairman would “say something about the problem of the three categories”, Mao responded:

Engels talked about the three categories, but as for me I don't believe (*xiangxin*) in two of those categories. (The unity of opposites is the most basic law, the transformation of quality and quantity into one another is the unity of the opposites quality and quantity, and the negation of the negation does not exist at all (*fouding zhi fouding genben mei you*.) The juxtaposition, on the same level, of the transformation of quality and quantity into one another, the negation of the negation, and the law of the unity of opposites is “triplism” (*san yuan lun*), not monism. The most basic thing is the unity of opposites. The transformation of quality and quantity into one another is the unity of the opposites quality and quantity. There is no such thing as the negation of the negation (*mei you shenme fouding zhi fouding*). Affirmation, negation, affirmation, negation ... in the development of things, every link in the chain of events is both affirmation and negation. Slave-holding society negated primitive society, but with reference to feudal society it constituted, in turn, the affirmation. Feudal society constituted the negation in relation to slaveholding society but it was in turn the affirmation with reference to capitalist society. Capitalism was the negation in relation to feudal society, but it is, in turn, the affirmation in relation to socialist society.⁶⁹

A number of points can be made about this passage. First, when called on to address the issue of categories of Marxist philosophy, Mao commences by invoking Engels. We made the point earlier that the genealogy of the philosophical concepts and categories employed by Mao could be traced back to Engels, rather than Marx, and here is provided further substantiation of that judgment. Second, this is, as far as I am aware, the only textual evidence available to support the proposition that Mao did reject the category of the “negation of the negation”. It is possible to find many other positive references to this category in his writings from the 1930s to the 1960s, and the existence of these references calls into question the propriety of taking this one reference as final proof that Mao had cut his links with the orthodox Marxist philosophical tradition.⁷⁰ I will argue below that Mao's rejection of the “negation of the negation” was a rejection of the title, rather than the substance, of this philosophical category, that he was seeking a nomenclature more in keeping with his predilection to perceive a unity of opposites in all things and processes. To pursue this argument, let us first of all place Mao's 1964 statement in the broader context of his other textual references to the “negation of the negation”.

In his *Lecture Notes on Dialectical Materialism*, Mao referred to the “negation of the negation” as one of the “three basic principles (*faze*) of materialist dialectics” and incorporated a quote from Engels to reinforce his position.⁷¹ Similarly, the “negation of the negation” figures quite prominently in the pre-Liberation text of *On Contradiction*. In a section subsequently entirely excised from the official text, Mao analyzed and critiqued the three basic laws of formal logic. In doing so, Mao employed the “negation of the negation” as a foil to formal logic’s law of the excluded middle:

Correct thought should not exclude the third factor, should not exclude the law of the negation of the negation.... The law of excluded middle in formal logic also supplements its law of identity, which only recognizes the fixed condition of a concept, and which opposes its development, opposes revolutionary leaps, and opposes the principle of the negation of the negation.... Why do formal logicians advocate these things? Because they observe things separate from their continual mutual function and interconnection; that is, they observe things at rest rather than in movement, and as separate rather than in connection. Therefore, it is not possible for them to consider and acknowledge the importance of contradictoriness and the negation of the negation within things and concepts, and so advocate the rigid and inflexible law of identity.⁷²

Although it is evident from this document that Mao was employing the concept of the “negation of the negation” in a positive way during the Yan’an period, it is also evident, as we have seen, that Mao had arrived at a position which perceived the unity of opposites as the most important of the philosophical categories; as Mao was to point out in the same section of the pre-Liberation text of *On Contradiction*, “the revolutionary law of contradiction (namely the principle of the unity of opposites) therefore occupies the principal position in dialectics”.⁷³

In the Mao texts of the 1950s and early 1960s, we find that Mao was still employing the concept of the “negation of the negation”, and not by any means in a dismissive way. By the same token, this concept appears far less frequently than does the unity of opposites, and references to it are sometimes rather enigmatic. For example, in January 1957, Mao employed the concept of the “negation of the negation” to indicate Stalin’s lack of ability as a dialectician; “Stalin made mistakes in dialectics. ‘Negation of the negation’. The October Revolution negated capitalism but he refused to admit that socialism may be negated too”.⁷⁴ In May 1958, Mao again employed the concept to explain and illustrate change and supercession in the historical process; “The dialectics of Greece, the metaphysics of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance.... It is the negation of the negation.... Lenin’s dialectics, Stalin’s partial metaphysics, and today’s dialectics are also the negation of the negation”.⁷⁵ Similarly, in his July 1957 criticism of *Wen Hui Bao*, Mao had perceived the “negation of the negation” at work in the rapid fluctuations which characterized the political situation at the time: “Two meetings were called by the Journalists’ Association, the first a negation and the second a negation of the negation, and the fact that this took place in a little over a month indicates the swift changes in the situation in China”.⁷⁶ A further reference occurs in a text of May 1958, in which Mao called for a “negation of the negation” in rectifying the Chinese attitude toward foreigners; “By the end of the Ch’ing dynasty, when the foreigners attacked and entered China, the Chinese were frightened, became slaves, and felt inferior. Arrogant before, now we were too humble. Let us have the negation of the negation”.⁷⁷ In the same speech, Mao also referred cryptically to developments in the area of cooperativization as the “negation of the negation”.⁷⁸

As late as September 1962, Mao continued to employ this concept. In his important speech at the Tenth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee, he referred to the “negation of the negation” as constituting an aspect of the transformation of opposites into one another:

This kind of reversal is also possible in socialist countries. An example of this is Yugoslavia which has changed its nature and become revisionist, changing from a workers’ and peasants’ country to a country ruled by reactionary nationalist elements. In our country we must come to grasp, understand and study this problem really thoroughly ... otherwise a country like ours can still move towards its opposite. Even to move towards its opposite would not matter too much because there would still be the negation of the negation, and afterwards we might move towards our opposite yet again.⁷⁹

It is evident, therefore, that one can find a good number of references to the concept of the “negation of the negation” in the Mao texts of the late 1950s and early 1960s. It would appear that Mao’s August 1964 “rejection” of the concept is thus at odds with his otherwise relatively frequent and positive references to it. However, parallel to such references to the “negation of the negation” emerges a different appellation for the concept, one which suggests that Mao was seeking a label more in keeping with the more fundamental philosophical category of the unity of opposites. In his important “Sixty Articles on Work Methods” of January 1958, we discover that in referring to the three categories of Marxist philosophy, Mao did not actually employ the title of the “negation of the negation”:

The law of the unity of opposites, of quantitative to qualitative changes, and of affirmation and negation, will hold good universally and eternally.⁸⁰

The formula used here to describe the third philosophical category—“affirmation” (*kending*) and “negation” (*fouding*)—is identical to that used by Mao in his August 1964 talk on philosophy; “affirmation, negation ... in the development of things, every link in the chain of events is both affirmation and negation”.⁸¹ What we have here is merely a change in title, for the substance of the concept remains unchanged. The concept of the “negation of the negation assumes that the factor which negates the negative (for example, capitalism’s negation of feudalism) will initially constitute a positive factor, the affirmative. Over time, however, its positive character will transform into its opposite, the affirmative becoming the negative, as a new and historically progressive force emerges to challenge it. This cycle, of negation, affirmation, negation as described by Mao in August 1964, is in essence no different from that described earlier by himself and other Marxist philosophers, including Lenin and Engels, under the rubric of the “negation of the negation”.⁸² Mao’s demonstrable predilection for linking and using oxymoronic categories (life and death, truth and falsehood, materialism and idealism, right and wrong, finite and infinite, advanced and backward, to name but a few) suggests that he would have been unsympathetic to a formula which described a contradictory process and yet appeared to link like to like: the negation of the negation. By renaming the concept “affirmation and negation”, Mao could leave the substance of the concept unaltered while bringing its title into line with the pervasive idea that the unity of opposites exists in all things and processes.

At a speech in Hangzhou in December 1965, Mao was to return to the problem of the three categories and to the theme of the primacy of the law of contradiction; and here again, Mao was to describe the third category by the title “affirmation and negation”:

It was said that dialectics had three basic laws and then Stalin said there were four. But I think there is only one basic law—the law of contradiction. Quality and quantity, affirmation and negation, substance and phenomenon, content and form, inevitability and freedom, possibility and reality, etc., are all cases of the unity of opposites.⁸³

Mao here restates his long-held position that the law of contradiction—the unity of opposites—is the most basic law of materialist dialectics. What is even more significant, however, is that Mao does not overtly reject the law of the “negation of the negation”; rather, as in his “Sixty Articles on Work Methods” of 1958, Mao chooses to describe the law by the title “affirmation and negation”, a title which immediately suggests a unity of opposites. It is also significant that Mao listed this law along with a number of other categories of materialist dialectics which appear in his *Lecture Notes on Dialectical Materialism*. This reinforces the point made throughout this Introduction: that the philosophy enunciated in the *Lecture Notes*, which derived largely from Soviet sources, was to have a marked and sustained influence on the development and structure of Mao’s philosophical thought; and that it is thus illegitimate to dismiss this document as irrelevant to an understanding of Mao’s philosophy because of its derivation from and reliance on Soviet sources.

As a postscript to this discussion of Mao’s supposed rejection of the “negation of the negation” it is worth noting that its level of orthodoxy within Soviet philosophy has been far from static. As Marcuse points out, the concept “disappeared from the list of fundamental dialectical laws” following Stalin’s example of 1938.⁸⁴ Wetter, too, comments on the “checkered history” of this concept,⁸⁵ noting that Stalin’s omission of “the law of the negation of the negation” from *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (1938) meant the disappearance of this law from Soviet philosophy until after Stalin’s death.⁸⁶ It is also interesting that on its revival in the mid-1950s, Soviet philosophers turned to the writings of Mao Zedong, especially *On Contradiction*, as a basis from which to elaborate the “negation of the negation” from a fresh perspective,⁸⁷ one which concentrated on “preserving what is worthwhile of the old state and in elevating and transforming it to a higher positive level”.⁸⁸

At the very least, the “checkered history” of the law of the “negation of the negation” in Soviet philosophy calls into question the propriety of peremptory judgments regarding Mao’s heterodoxy on the issue, particularly when such judgments are based only on a single textual reference to a transcript of a conversation never intended for publication.

⁵⁶ *Mao Zedong ji*, Vol. VI, p. 300; *Mao Zedong ji bujuan*, Vol. V, p. 237.

⁵⁷ See Nick Knight, “Mao Zedong’s *On Contradiction* and *On Practice*: pre-Liberation Texts”, pp. 644-647.

⁵⁸ *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. I, p. 311; *Mao Zedong xuanji*, Vol. I, p. 274.

⁵⁹ *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. V, pp. 392-393.

⁶⁰ For an extensive list of Mao's references to the law of the unity of opposites and discussion of the formulation of laws (guilü) in Mao's thought, see N. J. Knight, *Mao and History: An interpretive essay on some problems in Mao Zedong's Philosophy of History* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1983), pp. 411-416, esp. note 333.

⁶¹ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow: FLPH, 1963), Vol. XXX VIII [sic], pp. 359-360. Emphases in original.

⁶² Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, p. 152.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁶⁴ M. B. Mitin et al., *Bianzhengweiwulun yu lishiweiwulun* [Dialectical and historical materialism], translated by Shen Zhiyuan (n.p.: Shangwe yinshuguan, 1936), pp. 212-213.

⁶⁵ *Li Da wenji* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1981), Vol. II, p. 132. On this point, see also *Mao Zedong zhexue pizhujì* [The philosophical annotations of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1988), pp. 6, 161, 169.

⁶⁶ John Bryan Starr, *Continuing the Revolution: The Political Thought of Mao* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 24; also Stuart R. Schram, *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 26; also Stuart Schram, 'The Marxist', in Dick Wilson (ed.), *Mao Tse-tung in the Scales of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 63; also Schram, *Mao Zedong: A Preliminary Reassessment*, p. 66.

⁶⁷ "Mao Zedong lun 'fouding zhi fouding'" [Mao Zedong on the "negation of the negation"] *Mao Zedong zhexue sixiang yanjiu dongtai* [Developments in the research of Mao Zedong's philosophical thought] No. 2 (1982), pp. 1-9. The *dongtai* is a *neibu* journal. See also Wang Shubai, "'Shijielun' 'Maodunlun' yu Zhongguo chuantong zhexue" ["On Practice" and "On Contradiction" and Chinese traditional philosophy], *Mao Zedong zhexue sixiang yanjiu dongtai* 4 (1987), pp. 1-7. See also He Zuerong, "Zai Mao Zedong zhexue sixiang zhong youwu 'fouding zhi fouding' de diwei" [The status of the "negation of the negation" in Mao Zedong's philosophical thought], *Mao SZedong sixiang yanjiu* 3 (1984), pp. 122-124.

⁶⁸ From Schram's perspective, Mao's "rejection" of the law of the "negation of the negation" is associated with the fact that Mao turned back to his Chinese roots during the 1960s. See Schram, *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed*, p. 26.

⁶⁹ Schram, *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed*, p. 226; for the original, see *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* [Long live the thought of Mao Zedong] (n.p.: n.p., August 1969), p. 558.

⁷⁰ Schram has argued that Mao's ideas on the issue of the "negation of the negation" raise "serious problems about the conformity of his thinking as a whole to the basic logic of Marxism, and of Leninism". See "The Marxist", p. 64.

⁷¹ *Mao Zedong ji*, pp. 300, 302.

⁷² *Mao Zedong ji bujuan*, pp. 245-246.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Miscellany of Mao Tse-tung Thought*, Part I, p. 50.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁷⁶ *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. V, p. 453.

⁷⁷ *Miscellany of Mao Tse-tung Thought*, Part I, p. 123.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁷⁹ Schram, *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed*, pp. 189-90.

⁸⁰ Ch'en, *Mao Papers*, p. 65.

⁸¹ Schram, *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed*, p. 226.

⁸² For a description and evaluation of the law of the “negation of the negation”, see Wetter, *Dialectical Materialism*, pp. 355-365; also De George, *Patterns of Soviet Thought*, pp. 89-90. See also *Mao Zedong zhexue pizhuji*, pp. 113-127. From Mao’s annotations in this source, some of which are reproduced in translation in this volume, it is very clear that he perceived the concept of “affirmation” as central to the law of the “negation of the negation”. He moreover invokes Lenin to reinforce his position.

⁸³ Schram, *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed*, p. 240.

⁸⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 137.

⁸⁵ Wetter, *Dialectical Materialism*, p. 355.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 312; also De George, *Patterns of Soviet Thought*, pp. 193, 210.

⁸⁷ Wetter, *Dialectical Materialism*, p. 359.

⁸⁸ De George, *Patterns of Soviet Thought*, p. 213.