

# The Principal Contradiction

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"There are many contradictions in the process of development of a complex thing, and one of them is necessarily the principal contradiction whose existence and development determine or influence the existence and development of the other contradictions", Mao Tse-tung says in his "On Contradiction", and later on he puts it still more precisely that "... at every stage in the development of a process there is only one principal contradiction which plays the leading role. ... Therefore, in studying any complex process in which there are two or more contradiction we must devote every effort to finding its principal contradiction." Because better than any other individual in the Communist Party of China he has proved himself capable of finding the principal contradictions at the various stages of the process of development of the Chinese revolution, he can allow himself to add: "Once this principal contradiction is grasped all problems can readily be solved."

## Contradictions are always concrete

The word "readily" must, of course, be understood in a highly relative sense – not least when we are concerned with solving social problems and leading a revolutionary war in a country the kind and size of China during a couple of decades – but still "readily" is the correct word, because once you have found the principal contradiction, you have found the general guiding line for further action, and the greatest and most decisive problem has been solved in working out politics, propaganda, slogans, military action.

Note should be taken of the fact that Mao Tse-tung uses the word "to find". The principal contradiction at the various stages of social development must be found. You cannot grasp it through speculating. You cannot, say, read "On

Contradiction" and then through discussion determine whether it "may be" this or that contradiction, which is the principal one at this or that time. It is never a question of "may be" – logically possible – it is always a matter of "is" or "is not". Contradictions – also contradictions in a social development – are always concrete things existing objectively. They are always there, and in a given process or at a given stage one of them is always the principal one, regardless of whether someone has found out about it or not.

To the Communist Party of China it was a matter of life and death, not only to the party itself but to millions and millions of people and to the future of the revolution in progress, whether the party and more specifically its leadership had found the principal contradiction at each single stage of the process of development, and whether it proved capable of taking correct action on the basis of this knowledge.

To us, to revolutionaries in Denmark in 1975, it is not quite of equal importance to find the principal contradiction – seeing that there is no revolutionary movement which organized revolutionaries may either lead to victory or to costly and painful defeat. But still it is of importance. It is of importance for to-day and for the nearest future, because also in a non-revolutionary situation there is work to be done, and this work must be done on the basis of a correct knowledge of the world, and it is of importance for a more distant future, seeing that revolutionary work in the parasite states of the Western World is long-term work which, maybe, will be carried to a successful end only by the next generation or by the next one again – generations which, however, it is our duty to help forming and educating.

### **Does world development constitute one process?**

When you live in a small country like Denmark, whose development has always been and still is determined by "external contradictions" rather than by its own internal ones alone, and whose development, anyway, has always been playing a minor role as far as world developments are concerned, it is near at hand – and always sensible – to go beyond the borders of the country to find the principal contradiction in the world to-day, that contradiction which influences and/or determines contradictions and their development also in Denmark.

Formerly we have read and written that "The main contradiction of the world to-day is the contradiction between imperialism and the neo-colonially exploited peoples". That was hardly a true statement, when we made it, and at any rate it is not true to-day. But before dealing with this question, let us have a look at the first part of the sentence: "The main contradiction of the world ..."

Is there one principal contradiction in the world to-day – that is to say one single contradiction, that determines and influences all other contradictions of the world (meaning of course the societies of the world)? Or put differently: Do the developments of the societies all over the world constitute one single process of development? If it is one process of development, at every single stage there will also be one contradiction, which is the principal one. If it is not one process, but several processes, there is no such single, principal contradiction.

If we go back in history for a moment, we shall very quickly see two things: First, that social development all over the world certainly has not always constituted one single process. Secondly, that at times of which you may safely say that it has been one process, the principal contradiction has been found in the imperialist part of the world.

Only the bourgeoisie and its mode of production, capitalism, turned the development of the world into one, integrated process. It is immediately obvious that at a time, when no communication took place between, say Europe and the Far East or Europe and America, there could not exist one contradiction determining or influencing all other contradictions in the world. Before the "discovery" of America, before the time of the great explorers and their travels round Africa to India and China, the world was divided up into separate societies, and even though before that social developments in Europe may have been one integrated process with certain contradictions dominating others at the various stages, no such one dominating contradiction can have existed for all societies on Earth.

These "discoveries" – the result of definite contradictions in the European communities at that time – constitute one of the pre-conditions of the rise of capitalism in Europe, and in step with the development of capitalism here the contradictions of capitalism to an ever increasing degree determined the development of the whole world.

### **The barbarian nations and capitalism**

"Modern industry has established the world-market, for which the discovery of America paved the way. This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land. This development has, in its turn, reacted on the extension of industry; and in proportion as industry, commerce, navigation, railways extended, in the same proportion the bourgeoisie developed, increased its capital, and pushed into the background every class handed down from the Middle Ages", Marx and Engels wrote in "The Manifesto of the Communist Party" in 1847.

"The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production, it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e. to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image." (Ibid.)

The rise of the bourgeoisie itself was a long historic process, and it also took a long time for the bourgeoisie to "create a world after its own image". From the breakthrough of capitalism in England at the end of the 18th century to the time of World War I, country after country, continent after continent were brought under the control of the capitalist industrial nations, which means that gradually the

contradictions of Western (later on, also Eastern) capitalism determined the social development of the whole world.

It is the internal contradictions of English capitalism itself which forces it to go beyond the English borders and makes it exploit India and break China's door open. This is not the place to study which dominating contradiction in England thus came to determine and influence also contradictions in India and China during the first half of the 19th century. But we know from Lenin's description of a later stage that the "need to export capital" – a dominant feature of imperialism and of the colonial policy of finance capital – "arises from the fact that in a few countries capitalism has become 'overripe' and ... cannot find a field for 'profitable' investment". (Lenin: Collected Works, Moscow 1964, vol. 22, p. 242). Here we can concentrate on the main thing, i.e. that historically speaking it was western capitalism and later on imperialism that determined and influenced developments also in the colonial countries and thus gradually in the whole world.

### **Imperialism transformed old feudal China**

Marx once described the effects of British rule in India in the following terms:

"However changing the political aspect of India's past must appear, its social condition has remained unchanged since its remotest antiquity, until the first decennium of the 19th century." "England has broken down the entire framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing. This loss of his old world, with no gain of a new one, imparts a particular kind of melancholy to the present misery of the Hindoo, and separates Hindustan, ruled by Britain, from all its ancient traditions, and from the whole of its past history." (Marx and Engels: On Colonies, Industrial Monopoly and Working Class Movement, Futura, 1972, p. 17) .

Mao Tse-tung has given similar descriptions of developments in China:

"... Chinese feudal society lasted for about three thousand years. It was not until the middle of the 19th century, with the penetration of foreign capitalism, that great changes took place in Chinese society." (Selected Works, vol. II, p. 309). In the same article he talks of "China's transformation into a semi-colony and colony by imperialism" (p. 314).

The contradictions inside British capitalism and later on contradictions among a number of capitalist countries not only starts developments in hitherto slumbering feudal China: As number one among several reasons why the Chinese revolution around 1930 took the path, it actually took, Mao expressly mentions the contradictions among imperialist powers. He writes in 1928:

"The long-term survival inside a country of one or more small areas under Red political power completely encircled by a White regime is a phenomenon that has never occurred anywhere else in the world. There are special reasons for this unusual phenomenon. It can exist only under certain conditions.

First, it cannot occur in any imperialist country or in any colony under direct imperialist rule, but can only occur in China which is economically backward, and which is semi-colonial and under indirect imperialist rule. For this unusual phenomenon can occur only in conjunction with another unusual phenomenon, namely war within the White regime ..", and

"The contradictions and struggles among the cliques of warlords in China reflect the contradictions and struggles among the imperialist powers" (Selected Works, vol. I, pp. 64 and 63).

However, not only the two most populous countries of the world – China and India – were gradually brought into a situation, in which it was contradictions in capitalist, later imperialist West and East that determined and influenced the contradictions of these countries themselves. Around the turn of the century the whole world had been divided up among the imperialist powers.

### **The fate of the colonies is decided in Europe**

In his "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism" Lenin describes the feverish scramble for colonies by the imperialist western powers during the last decades of the 19th century.

"We clearly see ... how 'complete' was the partition of the world at the turn of the twentieth century. After 1876 colonial possessions increased to enormous dimensions, by more than fifty per cent, from 40.000.000 to 65.000.000 square kilometres", and of the background of this scramble in the contradictions of capitalism he says:

"In the same way that the trusts capitalise their property at two or three times its value, taking into account its 'potential' (and not actual) profits and the further results of monopoly, so finance capital in general strives to seize the largest possible amount of land of all kinds in all places, and by every means, taking into account potential sources of war materials and fearing to be left behind in the fierce struggle for the last remnants of independent territories, or for the repartition of those territories that have already been divided."

And as a further explanation of China's special position, stressed by Mao, we may quote the following from the same book:

"Since we are speaking of colonial policy in the epoch of capitalist imperialism, it must be observed that finance capital and its foreign policy, which is the struggle of the great powers for the economic and political division of the world, give rise to a number of t r a n s i t i o n a l forms of state dependence." (Lenin: Collected Works, vol. 22, pp. 258, 262, 263).

World War I was first and foremost the result of the struggle among imperialist power groups for a repartition of the conquered territories, and Lenin not only notes that this first imperialist war for the first time and definitely has dragged the countries of the Far East, the countries outside Europe into civilisation: he directly

states that "it is a feature of the situation that in this war the fate of the colonies is being decided by a war on the Continent" (Collected Works, vol. 21, p. 303).

Thus at that time the contradictions between the two groups of imperialist powers at war determined and influenced not only all other contradictions in these countries themselves, but also in the colonies, nay, in the whole world. It was the principal contradiction in the world at just that stage of the development, not only of the imperialist countries themselves, but of the whole world.

### **Is a new contradiction becoming dominant?**

During periods like the four years of World War I from 1914 to 1918 it is easy to see, where the principal contradiction is to be found. In times of peace, when the inter-imperialist contradictions are less sharp, it is of course more difficult.

Thus it would take minute studies to determine what was the principal contradiction in the world during the boom years of 1924-29, but since colonial regime was still maintained we may safely declare that it would still be found somewhere in the capitalist world. The picture is a bit more clear during the great crisis, that started in 1929 as a result on the contradiction between production and sale under capitalist conditions, and we may also remind our readers of the fact that in 1923 Lenin expresses the hope that the contradiction between Western and Eastern imperialism (USA-JAPAN) will give the Soviet Union yet another breathing spell, as it did when the counter revolution was defeated because of this very contradiction.

From the middle of the 1930's a new contradiction is taking shape between groups of imperialist powers. Exactly at what time this new contradiction becomes the principal one – did it happen already in 1938? At the outbreak of the war in 1939? Not until June 22nd, 1941, when Germany attacked the Soviet Union? Or maybe not until December, 1941, when Japan attacked the US? – exactly when is not essential at this point. The essential thing is that undoubtedly it did become the principal contradiction during World War II.

The contradiction between the "Axis" and the "al-lied powers" was the principal contradiction determining and influencing all other contradictions of the world (here, as elsewhere, we of course disregard contradictions in out-of-way, primitive and totally insignificant parts of the world).

As Lenin put it, during World War I the fate of the colonies was decided on the European battle field. It was decided in such a way that the colonies of the victorious countries remained colonies of the victorious countries, while the former German colonies got new masters.

Also World War II was a struggle between two groups of imperialist countries (one of the groups was supplemented by the Soviet Union) for a repartition of the territories of the world. It was the aim of Germany and Japan to conquer not only developed Western Europe, but also to turn China into a colony and to wrest the colonies from the old colonial powers in both Africa and Asia – and had they won the war they should probably have divided the Soviet Union.

While once again the fate of the colonial countries was at stake in an armed conflict among others, this time the war was conducted partly on the territories of these colonial countries themselves.

This fact played a role in the abolition of the direct colonial rule, which was one of the results of World War II.

Does this mean that at the various stages of post-war development it was no longer contradictions inside the imperialist world, which were the dominant ones? Does it mean that during the process of de-colonization the contradiction between the colonies and the colonial powers was the principal one? Does it mean that at a certain point after the de-colonization the principal contradiction was, and maybe still is, that contradiction? Does it mean that the process of de-colonization has brought about a situation, in which the social development of the world is no longer one integrated process, and that, therefore, we can no longer speak of a "principal contradiction"?

Is a new contradiction, not between the neo-colonially exploited people and imperialism, but between the new independent states – developed since the time of de-colonization – and the imperialist countries, becoming the new, principal one?

This post-war period and our attitude towards it will be the theme of an article in the next issue.