

# Mao Zedong on contradiction



*A masterly exposition of how to use dialectics to change the world, by the leader of the Chinese revolution.*

Comrade Mao Zedong wrote the article [On contradiction](#) in 1937 to explain the dialectical method of analysis. He did this to counter the development of dogmatic approaches to study and practice that had developed within the Chinese Communist Party. He also sought to explain international events, particularly the struggle between Marxist-Leninist leadership and the right and, later, left opportunism within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Mao began by stating that “Dialectics is the study of motion.” For simplicity, he broke his article into six parts: 1. Two world outlooks 2. The universality of contradiction 3. The particularity of contradiction 4. Principal contradictions and principal aspects 5. Identity and the struggle of aspects of contradiction 6. Antagonism in contradiction

## Two world outlooks

Comrade Mao identified two general trends in the study of the development of the universe: 1. *The metaphysical conception* This view sees the world as static, fixed, with things being unrelated to each other and one-sided. Everything just ‘is’. The cause of change, according to the metaphysical view, is always external. In political terms, things or societies are said to change because of individuals, wars, famine and plagues. *External appearances* are everything and nothing is going on within. 2. *The dialectical conception* This view is primarily concerned with *internal* causes for change – what effect internal contradiction has on things, what forces are at work under the surface, how things change and how they relate to other things. Mao explained that all things contain contradictions. For example, it is the contradictions within an egg that enable it to hatch into a chicken. This does not *exclude* outside factors. Warmth needs to be applied externally to the egg before the inner processes of contradiction are set into motion. But the primacy of the internal contradictions is readily seen when one realises that the same warmth applied to a stone of similar size and shape as an egg will not lead to the hatching of a chicken. Mao explained: “the history of a society is the history of its internal contradictions”. Feudal society becomes capitalist as class forces develop, employers begin to buy labour, and

workers have wages to spend. Trade grows and so do the class forces of the proletariat (workers selling labour-power) and bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production and purchasers of labour-power). Famine, diseases, war and the actions of important individuals can affect this process, but they do not *determine* it.

## The universality of contradiction

Mao explained: “Contradiction is universal and absolute, it is present in the process of development of all things and permeates every process from beginning to end.” This also means that contradiction is the cause of motion. Without contradiction, nothing would exist. This is literally true in the sense of quantum mechanics – everything is made up of atoms. Atoms only exist due to the contradiction between positive (protons) and negative (electrons) moving around the neutral (neutrons). Without this movement, the atom would not hold together – nothing would exist! [Comrade Lenin](#) shared this dialectical analysis, which is common to all real [Marxists](#). He also emphasised the need to analyse the movement of opposites from beginning to end. This is the basis of the [Marxist-Leninist](#) method of study. It can be seen in the works of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong.

## The particularity of contradiction

Each type of motion has its own particular expression or form (the particularity). The particularity is the *qualitative* difference between one form of motion and another. They are all interdependent in nature and yet contain their own particular contradiction and particular essence. For example, motion can be light, sound, electricity, etc. All are present during a thunderstorm, yet each has a separate form. Mao pointed out that sciences are determined by the particularities of motion: mechanics is the study of action/reaction, physics is the study of positive/negative, chemistry is the study of the movement of atoms, and so on. Mao further explained that understanding particularity is essential to understanding the universal. Think of how the particularity of motion/contradiction allows for a scientific explanation of the thunderstorm. The friction between the

air currents (the contradiction) produces an electrical discharge sound, a discharge light and a discharge to earth: a process containing particularities. The metaphysical outlook could never give this full understanding; it would be 'an act of God'. Particularity is therefore what defines the distinctness of an individual thing.

## Principal contradictions and principal aspects

It is important to recognise the *principal* contradiction in any given situation. Within a given developed capitalist country, for example, the principal contradiction is generally that between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. There are, however, also other contradictions, such as that of the proletariat with the peasantry or petty bourgeoisie. In the oppressed nations, the situation is more complex. As Mao put it: "When imperialism launches a war of aggression against such a country, all its various classes, except for some traitors, can temporarily unite in a national war against imperialism. "At such a time, the contradiction between imperialism and the country concerned becomes the principal contradiction, while all the contradictions among the various classes within the country (including what was the principal contradiction, between the feudal system and the great masses of the people) are temporarily relegated to a secondary and subordinate position." Hence, the principal contradiction is not static – indeed, part of the difficulty in making sense of history, and, more importantly, of actually *making* history, is understanding how the contradictions change in their inter-relationships with one other. But there must always be one contradiction that is principal at any given time: "Hence, if in any process there are a number of contradictions, one of them must be the principal contradiction playing the leading and decisive role, while the rest occupy a secondary and subordinate position." Understanding this phenomenon, and analysing and acting on it correctly, goes to the very heart of the strategy and tactics of making a successful revolution.

## Identity and the struggle of aspects of contradiction

'Identity' here refers to the existence of two aspects of contradiction, one presupposing the other, which coexist in a single entity. In given circumstances, each aspect can transform itself into its opposite. Comrade Lenin stated that "*Dialectics* is the teaching which shows how opposites can be and how they happen to be (how they become) *identical*

– under what conditions they are identical, transforming themselves into one another – why the human mind should grasp these opposites not as dead, rigid, but as living, conditional, mobile, becoming transformed into one another." ([Note](#) from VI Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*, 1914) This part takes some understanding! First, contradiction contains opposites – high and low, or black and white, for example. These opposites are interlinked and cannot exist without each other. Think of a magnet: it is an iron bar with a positive and a negative polarity at either end. There can be no positive polarity without negative polarity; neither could have polarity without being contained within the iron bar. At the point of connection (the centre of the bar), the two must become identical, otherwise the bar would split into two parts. By adding another magnet, the negative and positive polarities become the ends of the two bars combined. This forces the previous bar ends to change; they become their opposites. Or think of hydrogen, which is an explosive gas, and oxygen, which is a catalyst for burning and explosion. Yet when hydrogen is ignited in oxygen, they combine to form water, which does not support burning and is not explosive. The two elements, through contradiction, become their opposite. In this process of becoming, it is possible for new things to be created. The proletariat are ruled by the bourgeoisie, yet, after a socialist revolution, they become the rulers. All contradictory things are interconnected: not only do they coexist in a single entity in given conditions, but in other given conditions they also transform themselves into one other. This is the full meaning of the 'identity of opposites'; that is what Lenin meant when he talked of how opposites "happen to be (how they become) identical – under what conditions they are identical, transforming themselves into one another". In our example, the proletariat will always struggle against the bourgeoisie (as long as the two classes continue to exist), but the *form* of the struggle will change. Once again, Lenin made this clear: "Unity (coincidence, identity, equal action) of opposites is conditional, temporary, transitory, relative. The struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, just as development and motion are absolute." ([On the question of dialectics](#), 1915) The classes will always struggle, even if this does not always appear obvious.

## Antagonism in contradiction

Antagonism is one form, but not the only form, of the struggle of opposites. Classes within society coexist for a long time within a society, and struggle takes place, but this only becomes antagonistic at a certain stage, under certain

conditions, when the contradiction cannot be resolved except by the elimination of one side or the other. At this point, the only resolution is through revolution. The bourgeoisie and the proletariat were always in contradiction with one other, but that contradiction did not become inherently antagonistic until feudalism was overthrown. After feudalism was overthrown, the interests of the bourgeoisie and of the proletariat were in irreconcilable antagonism to one other – an antagonism that can only be solved through the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and its elimination as a class. Of course, just because a contradiction is an antagonistic one (such as that between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in Britain today), it does not express itself at all times in the form of open conflict. The [USSR](#) and Nazi Germany were able to co-exist relatively peacefully for a while, although the contradiction between a socialist state and a bourgeois one cannot but be antagonistic, but this antagonism broke out eventually into open conflict, as in the end inevitably it must. Comrade Mao likened this underlying potential to that of a bomb: “Before it explodes, a bomb is a single entity in which opposites coexist in given conditions. The explosion takes place only when a new condition, ignition, is present. An analogous situation arises in all those natural phenomena which finally assume the form of open conflict to resolve old contradictions and produce new things.” The important thing to note is that the struggle *appears* latent, being noticed only at the point of open conflict, yet the struggle was continuing even as things from the outside seemed stable. Just because developments are not obvious to every casual observer, it should not be assumed they are not taking place! Mao considered the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: “The contradictions between the correct thinking of Lenin and Stalin and the fallacious thinking of Trotsky and Bukharin and others, did not first manifest themselves in an antagonistic form, but later they did develop into antagonism.” Lenin himself said: “Antagonism and contradiction are not at all one and the same. Under socialism, the first will disappear, the second will remain. That is to say antagonism is one form, but not the only form, of the struggle of opposites; the formula of antagonism cannot be arbitrarily applied everywhere.” (Remarks on N I Bukharin’s Economics of the Transitional Period, Selected Works, Vol 11) Mao’s article reveals to the reader that contradiction is present everywhere. He explained what its forms and aspects are and how the process works. In distinction to the metaphysical approach of bourgeois philosophers, dialectics show that everything is changing; all

is pregnant with possibility. The latent class struggle is ready to burst into open conflict under given circumstances; the opportunities to build for revolution are ever-present, and humankind can change and form its own destiny. As Karl Marx famously wrote: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it!” ([Theses on Feuerbach](#), 1845)

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