

ON CONFLICT

Contradiction exists in the process of the development of all things, and . . . in the process of the development of each thing a movement of opposites exists from beginning to end.¹

The central idea around which the political thought of Mao Zedong was constructed was that of conflict or contradiction and the change to which it gives rise. Each of the important political themes with which he dealt in his political writings was grounded in his view of conflict and change as aspects of the natural or given state of the political realm, as they are in the realm of nature. Because his theory of knowledge was based on this central idea, he regarded his political ideas not only as an explication of, but also as an example of this view of conflict and change, and thus as subject to the same laws of development that govern natural and political phenomena. In order, therefore, to understand the logic of Mao's theory of "continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat," we must begin by exploring this fundamental concept of conflict.

Mao's view of contradiction, conflict, and change can usefully be considered in terms of four aspects: first, as I have suggested, he took conflict to be a given, natural condition in society and nature alike; second, he regarded it as a ubiquitous condition; third, he viewed conflict as a beneficial characteristic of the world, in that the change it promotes is positive and progressive; and finally, he believed that conflict is a permanent condition of nature and society. It is the purpose of this chapter to use these four aspects as a means for organizing our exploration of the origin, nature, and implications of the idea of conflict and change that lay at the heart of Mao's political thought.

¹ 1937g:280/1, 316. The first number after the colon refers to the page number in the Chinese edition, the second number to the page number in the English-language translation.

On Conflict

CONFLICT AS GIVEN

Although it contravenes certain very fundamental principles underlying contemporary Western social and political thought, a view of the interaction of opposing forces as the natural state of society and nature is nevertheless very old and very widespread. It is found in the historical antecedents of modern Chinese thought, as well as in the historical antecedents of modern thought in Europe and America. Its pervasiveness may be explained by the fact that it is a view that can occur quite spontaneously to anyone who observes the natural world closely, and who entertains a sense that men and women are a part of that world, subject to its laws of change. This view of nature and of the relationship of men and women to nature—a view that we might think of as “pre-Promethean”—was common to preclassical Greek thought in the European intellectual tradition, and to pre-Confucian thought in the Chinese tradition.

In order to explore these early views of the interaction of opposing forces and their relationship to Mao’s use of the concept of conflict, we must first make some rather basic linguistic distinctions. At a very general level, we might think of opposition as one of several possible relationships between two items. In turn, it is useful to think of conflict as one of two possible types of relationships between opposites, the other being complementarity. Whether one regards conflict or complementarity as the appropriate way to conceive of the relationship between opposites affects, and is in turn affected by, one’s concept of and attitude toward change. The idea of opposition and that of change are, of course, conceptually distinguishable, but they appear closely linked in both early Greek and early Chinese thought. In both cases, a view of opposition as involving, most importantly, the interrelationship of complementary elements lent itself naturally to a view of change as repetitive, preordained, and cyclical. By contrast, a view of opposition as involving most importantly the relations of conflicting elements can give rise to a view of change as linear and progressive.

In the writings of Heraclitus of Ephesus one finds evidence of a view of the natural world as characterized by the interaction of opposed forces: “Living and dead, waking and sleeping, youth and age are one in the same; for they undergo change into one

On Conflict

another.”² The primary emphasis in Heraclitus’ treatment of opposition appears to be on the complementarity of, rather than on the conflict between opposites.³ Despite this emphasis, he does not ignore the occurrence of conflict: “Things taken together . . . and especially extremes or ‘opposites’ . . . are in one sense wholes or continua, in another sense not wholes, but separate and opposed. In one sense they tend together, to unity, while in another sense they tend apart, to plurality.”⁴ To the extent that he treats opposed elements as complementary, he sees change as cyclical in nature. To the extent that opposed elements are treated as being in conflict with one another, change of a different sort is implied: “One must know that conflict is common and right and that all things are necessarily brought about through conflict.”⁵

This view of nature as involving the often complementary and occasionally conflictual relationship of opposing forces was largely abandoned, or at least thoroughly transformed, as Greek thought developed into its maturity. By contrast, the association of opposition with nature in ancient Chinese thought was both

² Heraclitus, Fragment 88. The paraphrase is that found in J. Katz and R. W. Weingartner, *Philosophy in the West* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), p. 12. A good deal more literal translation is found in G. S. Kirk, *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 135: “And as the same thing there exists in us living and dead, and the waking and sleeping and young and old: for these things having changed round are those, and those things having changed round *again* are these ones.”

³ Kirk sees his attempt at showing the unity of opposites as involving first the argument that “opposites are ‘the same’ relative to different observers, or to different aspects of the same subject,” and second the argument exemplified by the fragment just quoted—that “opposites are ‘the same’ because they inevitably succeed one another” (Kirk, *Heraclitus*, p. 72). Charles H. Kahn, in his article, “A New Look at Heraclitus,” differs from previous interpreters of Heraclitus, Kirk among them, in seeing a continuity behind the fragments that places Heraclitus in proximity to the poets and philosophers of his age rather than to the natural scientists. “His real subject,” Kahn writes, “is not the physical world but the human condition, which for the Greeks means the condition of mortality. His aim is to conceive the relationship of life and death within a universal doctrine of opposition, transformation and hidden unity.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1:3 (1964), 194.

⁴ Kirk, paraphrasing Fragment 10, in *Heraclitus*, p. 176.

⁵ My own modification of Kirk’s translation of Fragment 80, *ibid.*, p. 238.

On Conflict

more pervasive and more influential in shaping succeeding modes of thought in the Chinese tradition than it was in the Greek case.

The earliest manifestation of the widespread interest in the relationship of opposing forces in Chinese thought is found in the *Yi Jing*—the Book of Changes. The dates of the various parts of this classic are the subject of considerable scholarly debate, but the system of divination on which the commentary is based is traditionally held to date from the eleventh century B.C.⁶ This system of trigrams and hexagrams is based on combinations of solid and broken lines, the solid representing the dominant or strong principle, the broken representing the recessive or weak principle. All possible combinations of three solid or broken lines form the eight trigrams. Two trigrams combined into a single six-line figure form a hexagram, of which there are sixty-four possible combinations.⁷

In the commentaries that accompany the hexagrams, the treatment of opposing forces is one that emphasizes their complementarity and, consequently, holds to a cyclical view of change: "The way of the Creative works through change and transformation, so that each thing receives its true nature and destiny and comes into permanent accord with the Great Harmony; this is what furthers and what perseveres."⁸ Indeed, the hexagrams themselves are often shown arranged in a circle, suggesting that each gives rise to another in a cyclical sequence.

The complementary relationship between dominant and recessive forces symbolized by the broken and solid lines was further

⁶ Wing-tsit Chan describes the problem of dating as follows: "Tradition has ascribed the Eight Trigrams to legendary Fu-hsi, the sixty-four hexagrams to King Wen (r. 1171-1122 B.C.), the two texts (1 and 2) to him or Duke Chou (d. 1094 B.C.), and the 'ten wings' to Confucius. Most modern scholars have rejected this attribution, but they are not agreed on when and by whom the book was produced. Most probably it is a product of many hands over a long period of time, from the fifth or sixth century B.C. to the third or fourth century B.C." *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 262n. Cf. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), II, 306f., who agrees with those who carry the process up through the first century A.D.

⁷ Helmut Wilhelm's translation of the *Yi Jing* into German has been rendered into English by Cary F. Baynes, *The I Ching or Book of Changes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series XIX, 1967).

⁸ Commentary on the judgment on the first hexagram, *Ch'ien* (*Qian*)/The Creative, *ibid.*, p. 371.

On Conflict

developed and formalized through the use of the terms, *yin* and *yang*. Among the earliest antecedents of the school of thought devoted to the study of these terms and the concepts for which they stood is the comment in the fifth chapter of the *Xi Ci* or "Great Appendix" of commentary on the *Yi Jing*: "One *yin* and one *yang*: that is the *Dao*."⁹ The character *yin*, standing for the recessive principle, coldness, darkness, femaleness, that which is inside or hidden, depicts the shadows of hills and clouds, and originally referred to the shady side of a mountain or valley. The character *yang*, standing for the dominant principle, warmth, light, maleness, that which is outside or manifest, depicts either a flag fluttering in the sunshine, or a figure (possibly a male ritual dancer) holding up a perforated jade disk, symbol of heaven and thus of light, and referred originally to the sunny side of a mountain or valley.¹⁰ The relationship of the two forces was symbolically represented by the *tai ji tu*—a circle divided into light and dark segments, each of which in turn contains a spot of the other.¹¹

Although conflict of opposing forces is not ignored in the *I Jing*, the principle emphasis there is on their complementarity. Deriving from this emphasis, as Wilhelm has pointed out, are three types of change that are distinguished from one another in the classic: "nonchange, cyclic change, and sequent change. Nonchange is the background, as it were, against which change is made possible." Harmony and order are seen in the *I Jing* as transitory conditions, giving way in each instance to change.¹²

Daoist thought¹³ emphasizes particularly clearly the interrela-

⁹ *Yi yin yi yang zhi wei dao*. Wilhelm and Baynes translate the phrase, "That which lets now the dark, now the light appear is *tao*" (p. 297), thereby emphasizing the dynamic and cyclical implications of the passage. Needham's comment on the sentence is that "the general sense must be that there are only these two fundamental forces or operations in the universe, now one dominating, now the other, in wavelike succession." *Science and Civilization*, II, 273.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 273f.

¹¹ As Wilhelm points out, the emphasis in this diagram is on the *ji*—a character with the original meaning of ridgepole or line. "With this line, which in itself represents oneness, duality comes into the world, for the line posits an above and a below, a right and a left, front and back—in a word, the world of the opposites." Wilhelm and Baynes, *I Ching*, IV.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 280ff.

¹³ There is considerable disagreement with regard to the period in which Daoism originated. Some argue that Lao Zi, generally regarded as the author of the *Dao De Jing*, was Confucius' senior by a half century and

On Conflict

tionships of opposites in nature as found in *yin-yang* thought. Daoist writings are filled with references to opposites in nature and to the cyclical change that results from the complementarity of these opposing forces, as is suggested in this passage from the *Zhuang Zi*: "Light came from darkness, order from the formless. . . . Life springs into existence without a visible force and disappears into infinity. . . . Such is the operation of the *Dao*. . . . Awe-inspiring, beginning again in cycles ever new."¹⁴ In the *Dao De Jing* the implications of this emphasis on the complementary relationship of opposing forces and the resultant cyclical nature of change are spelled out yet more clearly: "Prosperity tilts over to misfortune and good fortune comes out of bad. Who can understand this extreme turning point? For it recognizes no such thing as normality. Normality changes into abnormality."¹⁵

As Needham convincingly argues,¹⁶ the result of this concern over opposition is a focus on the *relationship* of the opposite forces rather than on their separate qualities. Another passage from the *Dao De Jing* illustrates this point:

Being and non-being produce each other;
Difficult and easy complete each other;
Long and short contrast each other;
High and low distinguish each other;
Sound and voice harmonize with each other;
Front and back follow each other.¹⁷

The dominance of the idea of the complementarity of opposing

that his work is thus the product of the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. Others see the *Dao De Jing* as the product of the third or fourth centuries B.C. Chan summarizes the argument and sides with the earlier date. *Source Book*, p. 138.

¹⁴ *Zhuang Zi*, chapter 22, translated by Legge, cited in Needham, *Science and Civilization*, pp. 38f.

¹⁵ *Dao De Jing*, chapter 58, cited in Needham, *Science and Civilization*, p. 75.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 199f.

¹⁷ *Dao De Jing*, chapter 2, translated in Chan, *Source Book*, p. 140. Zhang Dongsun refers to the Daoist tendency toward "correlative logic" in the article: Chang Tung-sun, "A Chinese Philosopher's Theory of Knowledge," *Yenching Journal of the Social Sciences* 1:2 (1939), 155, reprinted in *Etc: A Review of General Semantics* 9 (1952), 203. Zhang bases his argument on the linguistic grounds that Chinese lacks a clear-cut equivalent to the verb "to be."

On Conflict

forces is suggested by the fact that none of the relationships described here can, strictly speaking, be conceived of as conflictual.

Of the various schools of thought that emerged in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., however, it was Confucianism which, through its many transmogrifications, became the dominant philosophical school in the public realm in China. As compared with Daoist thinkers, Confucius was less inclined to view man as a part of nature, subject to its forces. Taken as a whole, his teachings were less concerned with natural relations than with human relations, and less concerned with conflict than with harmony. Such an interpretation is called into question by those who hold to the traditional view that Confucius not only studied the *I Jing* closely, but also wrote the *Tuan Zhuan* or “Commentary on the Decisions”—the first two of the ten “wings” or sets of commentary that subsequently became a part of the classic.¹⁸

Whichever position one takes, however, one must acknowledge that Confucianists attempted to integrate the ideas on opposition contained in the *Yi Jing* with Confucius’ own teachings. Among others, the philosopher most responsible for the elevating of Confucianism to the position of state ideology that it subsequently held, Dong Zhongshu, undertook this integration. Associated with what has subsequently come to be called the “*Yin-yang* School” of Confucianism, Dong interpreted the inter-relational logic of the *Yi Jing* through the framework of a Confucian emphasis on harmony and stability. Opposition there was in the natural world, Dong argued, but the opposite forces represented in the hexagrams were complementary, not contradictory, and together they comprised unity, wholeness. Since the achievement of harmony and balance was the desired goal of the Confucian, the opposite forces of *yin* and *yang* were to be harnessed by men and women to achieve that harmony and balance.¹⁹

¹⁸ There is a passage in the *Lun Yu* (Analects) in which Confucius is reported as having said, “Give me a few more years so that I can devote fifty years to the study of the *I Jing*. I may be free from great mistakes” (*Lun Yu* 7:16, in Chan, *Source Book*, 32). Those who do not accept so early a date for the *I Jing* regard this passage as a later addition to the *Lun Yu* aimed at confirming the Confucian legitimacy of the philosophy of change. See Needham, *Science and Civilization*, II, 307.

¹⁹ Dong Zhongshu, for example, incorporates the following passage in his *Qun Qiu Fanlu* (Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals): “Heaven possesses *yin* and *yang* and man also possesses *yin* and *yang*. When the universe’s material force of *yin* arises, man’s material force of *yin* arises

On Conflict

Dong's explicit incorporation of *yin-yang* theory into the corpus of Confucianism resulted in a subtle but important modification both of the Confucian concept of harmony and of the *yin-yang* concept of opposition: harmony was now regarded as a goal to be striven for by human endeavor rather than simply a natural characteristic of the world. By treating harmony as the result of the actions of moral men and women, Dong and his followers left open the implication that, left to itself, the world would be naturally conflictful and, according to the values assigned by the Confucianist, evil. Thus, while Confucianism came to the point of conceding the givenness of conflict, it did not go so far as to accept an assessment of that natural conflict as being productive of social growth and development, nor the idea that, in the very process of resolving conflict, new conflicts are produced.²⁰

Thus we see that both of the major schools of philosophy in traditional China took cognizance of the problem of opposition and its relationship to change.²¹ Confucianism, which became in Han times the dominant philosophy in the public and political

in response. Conversely, when man's material force of *yin* arises, that of the universe should also rise in response. He who understands when he wishes to bring forth rain, will activate the *yang* in man in order to arouse the *yang* of the universe."

²⁰ Needham carries his discussion of the relationship between science and the dominant modes of thought in traditional China through Zhu Xi and Song Neo-Confucianism. He says, "I shall suggest that Chu Hsi's philosophy was fundamentally a philosophy of organism, and that Sung Neo-Confucians thus attained, primarily by insight, a position analogous to that of Whitehead, without having passed through the stages corresponding to Newton and Galileo. They thus present a parallel with Mohist and Taoist thinkers of the Warring States period, who may be said to have attained gleams of dialectical logic thereby anticipating Hegel, without ever having passed through the logic of Aristotle and the scholastics"; *Science and Civilization*, II, 458.

²¹ Derk Bodde explores views of conflict and change in his article, "Harmony and Conflict in Chinese Philosophy," in Arthur F. Wright, ed., *Studies in Chinese Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 19-80. There he concludes, "prominent in all these schools [of Daoist, *yin-yang*, and Confucian thought] is the belief that the universe is in a constant state of flux but that this flux follows a fixed and therefore predictable pattern consisting either of eternal oscillation between two poles or of cyclical movement within a closed circuit; in either case the change involved is relative rather than absolute, since all movement serves in the end only to bring the process back to its starting point" (p. 21).

On Conflict

realm, resolved whatever ambiguity existed in *yin-yang* thought between the conflict or complementarity of opposites in favor of what we might term an enforced complementarity. This tendency was enhanced as Confucianism became transformed into a kind of state doctrine or ideology that served both to explain and to justify the existing political order. The elevation of Confucianism to a position of dominance in the political realm did not result in the weakening of Daoist thought, however. Indeed, the latter, with its relatively more ambiguous response to the question of whether relationships between opposed forces in the natural world were to be conceived of as primarily conflictual or primarily complementary, and with its advocacy of the position of *wu-wei*, or nonaction, for human beings confronted with this natural opposition, continued to thrive. Just as Confucianism became associated with the function of statecraft, so Daoism became associated with the functions of other, generally more private realms of life. Popular religious practices, moreover, many of which antedated the formal elaboration of these philosophical schools, came to be associated with both of them, resulting in the popularization (and often the bastardization) of the philosophical position on which each rested.

Consequently Confucianism and Daoism, and the ideas of opposition and change incorporated in each, survived well into the nineteenth century and beyond, as much-modified but nonetheless still viable modes of philosophical inquiry. In a similar fashion, these ideas also survived in the popular culture as much-modified but still viable sources of moral and ethical principles and of religious practices. Western thought, by contrast, lacked this continuity of concern with a view of opposition as a given condition of the natural world.

Two ideas basic to the development of Western thought after Heraclitus and his contemporaries contravene the assumptions underlying a view of nature as characterized by the interaction of opposite forces. The first is the Aristotelian concept of identity, on which logic is based. The second is the Newtonian concept of motion, on which foundation not only the physical sciences but also much contemporary social thought rests. The idea of identity, developed by Aristotle as a fundamental element of his theory of logic, postulates that an object cannot at the same time possess or manifest opposite qualities or characteristics. In

On Conflict

these terms, it is logical to say that the object is either x or non- x . It cannot be both at once.²² This exactly contravenes a view such as that of Heraclitus who, looking for internal conflicts within every aspect of the natural and social worlds, argued that every item must at the same time be both x and non- x . It is the Aristotelian and not the Heraclitan view that prevailed in the development of Western logic.

The second idea that became ascendent in opposition to the view of natural opposition was formalized in Newton's laws of motion, but had long been in currency before Newton's time: bodies are naturally at rest; motion is the result of the impetus imparted from without by another moving body.²³ Translated from the physical to the social realm, this postulate forms the basis of a view prevalent in European and American thought, one that sees society as existing naturally in a state of equilibrium and stasis rather than one of opposition, movement, and change. The existence of social conflict and change necessarily must, following this view, be induced and explained, since they constitute deviations from the normal or natural.²⁴ For Heraclitus and his ancient Chinese counterparts, opposition and change are the given states of the natural and social worlds, and it is the existence of equilibrium and stasis that requires inducement and explanation.

²² See, for example, his statement in the *Ethics* in response to the question, "what is science?": "We all see that scientific knowledge is of things that are never other than they are . . ."; Book vi, chapter 3, translated by J.A.K. Thomson (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin, 1955), p. 174.

²³ Newton's first law of motion reads as follows: "Every body continues in its state of rest, or of uniform motion in a right [i.e., straight] line, unless it is compelled to change that state by forces impressed on it"; *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica* (1687) translated by A. Motte, in Paul Edwards, ed., *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Company and Free Press, 1967), v, 49. See also Michael J. Buckley, *Motion and Motion's God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971). It is a view that was also held by Mao in his pre-Marxist phase. In his 1917 article on physical education he commented, "in general, that which is at rest cannot set itself in motion; there must be something to move it" (1917:159). Earlier in the same article, however, in an attempt to distinguish his views from the Daoist idea of nonaction, he commented, "in my opinion, however, there is only movement in heaven and earth" (ibid., p. 157).

²⁴ Barbara Russett, *The Concept of Equilibrium in American Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966) attributes the ascendancy of the concept of equilibrium in social thought to the work of Comte and Spencer in the late nineteenth century, and traces its origins to Archimedes and Hippocrates in the Greek tradition.

On Conflict

Mao consistently treats the interaction of opposing forces as a natural, given state of things. "Imbalance," he wrote in 1958, "is a universal, objective law. Things forever proceed from imbalance to equilibrium and again, from equilibrium to imbalance in a cycle, but each cycle brings about a higher plane. Imbalance is constant and absolute, while equilibrium is temporary and relative."²⁵ The opposite point of view, one that sees equilibrium as natural or given, Mao (citing Engels and Lenin) labeled "meta-physical."²⁶

Mao was exposed to and assimilated, through his experience of and education in Chinese culture, the view that the natural and social realms are inherently fraught with the interaction of opposing forces—a view we have found articulated in both the Daoist and the Confucianist traditions. Nonetheless, he came to reject the emphasis placed in these schools of thought on the complementarity of these opposing forces. He rejected, as well, the corollary that followed from this idea of complementarity, namely, that the change in which that opposition eventuates must be cyclical or sequential in nature. In their place he substituted the idea, gleaned from his study of Marx, that it was conflict, not complementarity, that characterizes the inherent opposition in nature and society, and that change must, as a result, be progressive and not cyclical.

CONFLICT AS UBIQUITOUS

There is a distinction to be drawn between those who have seen the world as naturally fraught with the interaction of opposing forces and those who go on to argue that one's mode of analysis—the logic of one's inquiry—should reflect this interaction. The link that we find in Hegel and his successors between opposition as subject matter and opposition as method—a link that we associate with the term, "dialectic"—is a recent development in Western thought. In Greek thought the origins of what is called the dialectical method do not coincide with the origins of a view of the world as governed by the dynamic of internal conflict. In the history of Chinese philosophy it is at least possible to consider the two strains of thought as having had a common origin. And in the exploration of this common origin, we will find

²⁵ 1958e:7; see also 1955f:28; 1958v:112; and 1959c:201.

²⁶ 1937g:275/1, 312.

On Conflict

suggestions of the idea that even within the Chinese tradition itself there was a place for the concept of opposition as conflictual and of change as progressive.

The word “dialectic” has a common root with the word “dialogue,” both of which can be traced to the Greek word, *dialegesthai*, to converse. The origin of the dialectical method is ordinarily ascribed to Zeno of Elea, who based his method on the principle of unitary identity—the idea that a thing cannot possess opposite qualities at the same moment.²⁷ Zeno thus refuted his opponents in argumentation by leading them to the point of affirming two contradictory positions. The argument was won when Zeno pointed out the contradiction. This dialectical method became the basis of the Sophists’ approach to argumentation.²⁸

Socrates and Plato used the term “dialectic” in a somewhat different sense to describe the method of arriving at truth through a dialogue—through a series of questions and answers.²⁹ Aristotle regarded the dialectic in a narrower sense as an inferior form of argumentation based, as he saw it, on secondary premises rather than on the primary premises of direct observation, characteristic of what he called the “demonstrative method.”³⁰

As it emerged from its origins in Greek thought, then, the dialectical method was firmly grounded not on the idea that conflict or contradiction was a natural characteristic of the world, and thus that any method of analysis should reflect those contradictions, but rather on one of two different views: either that associated with Aristotle, which contended that, since internal contradiction was *not* a characteristic of the world, logical proofs could be based on the demonstration and refutation of such contradictions; or that associated with Socrates and Plato, which divorced the dialectic from any necessary association with the

²⁷ See, for example, Zeno’s defense of his concept of monism in H.D.P. Lee, *Zeno of Elea: A Text with Translation and Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), pp. 18f.

²⁸ See, for example, Socrates’ dialogue with Thrasymachus concerning the conventional conception of morality in *Republic*, Book I, 11.336-357, translated by H.D.P. Lee (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin, 1955), pp. 62ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Book VII, 11.532-538, pp. 300-304. Plato also uses the term more narrowly in the *Republic* to refer to the hierarchical arrangement of the forms from specific to general.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Ethics* VI, 3, pp. 174f.

On Conflict

natural order, and which employed it as a means for seeking the truth through the interaction of conflicting ideas.

While these views of the dialectic were influential in shaping medieval thought, it was in the hands of German philosophers, beginning with Kant and leading through Fichte, Schelling, and Schleiermacher to Hegel that the dialectic was both transformed and given renewed importance. What Hegel and his predecessors attempted was, in effect, an integration of the Aristotelian and Platonic constructions of the dialectic: contradictory ideas do in fact negate one another, they argued, but that negation results not in the invalidation of the original idea, but in its supercession through the emergence of a new idea. A thesis, as Fichte described the process, interacted with its opposite idea, the antithesis, to produce a new synthesis. An idea, to use Hegel's terms, naturally gives rise to its negation and out of the conflict between these two there emerges as the result of an *Aufhebung* or supercession a new idea, the negation of the negation. Hegel viewed each instance of this process as a part of the gradual realization of the Absolute Idea through history.³¹ Because this historical process is fraught with the conflict of opposed elements, the dialectic—our method for comprehending that process—likewise must incorporate the interaction of conflicting opposites.

When Marx set about “standing Hegel on his feet” by translating his idealist dialectic into materialist terms, he took the Hegelian transformation of the dialectic a step farther by integrating with it a Heraclitan view of the natural world as characterized by natural opposition. Whereas Heraclitus had emphasized the complementarity of that inherent opposition, however, Marx emphasized its conflictual character.

In the Chinese tradition, the split between conflict as phenomenon and conflict as analytical method was by no means so pronounced. The *Yi Jing* was at the same time a description of the world as multifarious combinations of conflicting elements, and a mode of analysis, however primitive, for understanding these natural phenomena by reflecting their conflict. As we have seen,

³¹ Gustav Mueller, in a spirited defense of Hegel against the over-simplifying “thesis-antithesis-synthesis” formula, attributes its association with Hegel's thought to Marx, for whom, in Professor Mueller's view, “brutal simplifications” are his “specialties.” “The Hegel Legend of ‘Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis,’” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19 (1958), 414.

On Conflict

these primitive methods were refined in Daoism into a kind of prototypical dialectic. This is most clearly suggested in the second chapter of the *Zhuang Zi*: "The sages harmonize the affirmations 'it is' and 'it is not,' and rest in the natural equalizations of Heaven. This is called 'following two courses at once.'" ³² In Needham's view, this dialectical bent in Daoism made it considerably better able to deal with change as observed in nature, and it was thus in its inception a type of thought considerably more conducive to the development of natural science than was what he calls the "rigid Aristotelian formalism" of Western thought. ³³

These views in Daoism are made even more explicit in the philosophical writings of Mo Zi. ³⁴ "That which 'must be so' is not a terminus. Every affirmation is accompanied by a negative, every natural phenomenon meets another one behaving opposite to it. Wherever there is a must-be-so there will also be a must-not-be-so. Wherever there is an 'is' there will also be an 'isn't.' And this is what really 'must be so.'" ³⁵ He continues: "Some affirm that certain things are so, and are convinced that their affirmation is right. Others deny it and raise questions about it. But [ultimate truth] is like the sage; it contains all the negations but has no [more] contradictions." ³⁶

³² Several writers have noted the affinity between this chapter of the *Zhuang Zi* and the much later use of the dialectic by Hegel and others. The argument is most complete in Tang Qunyi's article, "Heigeer de bienhua xingershangxue yu Zhuang Zi de bienhua xingershangxue bijiao" (A Comparison of the Metaphysical Transformation in Hegel and Zhuang Zi), *Quarterly Review of the Sun Yat-sen Institute for the Advancement of Culture and Education* 3:4 (1936), 1301-1315. The article is abstracted in *China Institute Bulletin* (New York) 1:4 (1937), 27. See also Needham, *Science and Civilization* II, 74-77; and Chan, *Source Book*, p. 183.

³³ Needham, *Science and Civilization*, II, 76f. He attributes the failure to realize this potential for scientific development in China to what he calls "unfavorable environmental conditions," *ibid.*, p. 194.

³⁴ Mo Zi (fl. 479-438 B.C.) developed his philosophy based on the idea of universal love between the time of Confucius and that of Confucius' disciple, Mencius. Chan argues that Moism is a relatively unimportant school of Chinese thought, and that "modern interest in Moism arose in China because of its utilitarian spirit and in the West because of its superficial resemblance to the Christian teachings of the will of God and universal love"; Chan, *Source Book*, p. 212.

³⁵ *Jing shang* proposition 51, as numbered by Tan Jiefu, *Mo Jing I Jie* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1935), cited in Needham, *Science and Civilization* II, 180.

³⁶ *Jing xia* proposition 1, cited *ibid.*, II, 181.

On Conflict

A second strand of proto-dialectical thought exists within the Chinese tradition, this one traceable to Indian dialectical logic, introduced into China with Buddhism. The Indian school in question is that of Nāgārjuna,³⁷ whose texts elaborating his theory of Mādhyamika (“the doctrine of the middle”) were translated into Chinese as the *Zhong Lun* in the fifth century A.D.³⁸ A central principle of this school of thought has been paraphrased as follows: “Everything is in perpetual change, not for one moment the same, and therefore not real.”³⁹ The two Chinese philosophers most closely associated with Buddhist dialectic are Seng-zhao (A.D. 384-414) and Ji-zang (A.D. 549-623). Whereas Seng-zhao emphasized the natural affinities between this mode of thought and similar strains in Daoism, Ji-zang elaborated the dialectical method of refutation and negation by means of which the highest level of Truth—the “True Middle”—is to be reached.⁴⁰

As is evident in these passages, the dominance of a view of the relationship between opposed elements as complementary, which we found in the treatment of the natural world in ancient Chinese thought, gives way to some extent in these methodological discussions to the suggestion that conflict as well as complementarity may occur. It is also evident that the combination that Marx effected between a concept of the world as characterized by the interaction of opposed forces and the concept of an investigative method as characterized by the interaction of opposed forces had been effected in at least a primitive way centuries earlier in the Chinese tradition.

The observation that there are parallels to be drawn between the development of the dialectic in China and the West has been made by Mao and his colleagues. Speaking with the French politician and writer, Alain Peyrefitte, in 1972, the Chinese writer Guo Moro observed that both ancient Greek and ancient Chinese thought had had a dialectical strain. Western thought had lost its dialectic, Guo argued, through the ascendance of the ideas of Aristotle and Descartes, whereas the ancient dialectic had re-

³⁷ See S.C.A. Vidyabhusana, “History of the Mādhyamika Philosophy of Nāgārjuna,” *Journal of the Buddhist Text Society* 5 (1897), 3.

³⁸ The translation was made by Kumārajīva (A.D. 344-413). See Chan, *Source Book*, p. 343.

³⁹ The paraphrase is that of Needham, *Science and Civilization* II, 405.

⁴⁰ Excerpts from Seng-zhao’s *Zhao Lun* and Ji-zang’s *Er Di Zhang* (Treatise on the Two Levels of Truth) in which their dialectical views are expressed are found in Chan, *Source Book*, pp. 344-356 and 360-369.

On Conflict

mained a viable mode of thought in China. Indeed, he suggested—perhaps not without a note of irony—Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Marx may have borrowed their concept of the dialectic from China.⁴¹ When Mao himself spoke of the relationship between ancient and modern uses of the dialectic in China and the West, he did so in a somewhat different way from Guo. Each relationship, he argued, was itself dialectical: in the West, Greek dialectics were negated by medieval metaphysics, and both were superseded by the dialectic of Hegel and Marx. In China, similarly, ancient dialectics were negated by the metaphysics of the feudal classics, and both were superseded by the introduction of Marxism into China.⁴²

This idea of the continuity of a tradition of protodialectical thought in the Chinese setting is critical to an understanding of the way in which Mao assimilated and developed the dialectical ideas he found in Marxism. Where Hegel and Marx were able to argue with considerable reason that their ideas were a novel rejection and supercession of the Western philosophical tradition, Mao's development of these ideas of Marx in the Chinese setting took place in the context of the vital resonances with the Chinese philosophical and cultural traditions that these ideas struck. We can say of Mao that he was, by virtue of his familiarity with the protodialectical aspect of the Chinese philosophical and cultural traditions, a "natural dialectician," in the same sense that Stuart Schram described him as a "natural Leninist" because of his innate receptivity to Lenin's emphasis upon political struggle and to his principles of revolutionary organization.⁴³ At the same time, it is important to realize that this same point can be made about the audience to whom Mao addressed himself in writing and speaking about the dialectic. That he was aware of this fact may be seen from the examples that he typically used to illustrate his dis-

⁴¹ Alain Peyrefitte, *Quand la Chine s'éveillera, le monde tremblera* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), pp. 47f.

⁴² 1958s:98. He explained the reason for the necessity of this supercession in both cases in an earlier formulation of the same argument: "Ancient dialectics . . . had a somewhat spontaneous and naive character; in the social and historical conditions then prevailing, it was not yet able to form a theoretical system, hence it could not fully explain the world and was supplanted by metaphysics"; 1937g:273/1, 315. Cf. similar arguments in 1958l:109f., and 1959c:205.

⁴³ Stuart R. Schram, *Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (New York: Praeger, 1963), p. 33.

On Conflict

cussions of the dialectic—examples that give the dialectic in Mao's hands a uniquely Chinese character.⁴⁴ This unique character is particularly evident in his treatment of the concept of the ubiquity of conflict, a concept by means of which nature, society, and method are linked by the common trait of conflict.

As I have suggested, Marx effectively combined the view of conflict as method, which he drew from Hegel and his immediate predecessors, with his reinterpretation of a much earlier strain of thought, which saw the material world as naturally fraught with opposition—a reinterpretation that emphasized the conflictual rather than the complementary nature of that opposition. This reinterpretation is suggested by the use in the work of Marx's successors of the term "contradiction" to describe dialectical relationships. The use of this term, however, obscured what had been a fairly clear distinction between the more general concept of conflict and the specific type of conflict described with that term, contradiction. In common parlance we ordinarily distinguish between objects, forces, or ideas that are in conflict with one another, and objects, forces, or ideas that are in opposition or contradiction with one another. Conflict and contradiction have in common the implication of a common framework within which the objects, forces, or ideas interact. However, where the concept of conflict allows for some possible common ground of agreement within that framework, the idea of contradiction, suggesting as it does diametric or antipodean opposition, does not.

It is in the material realm that the idea of contradiction or antipodean opposition makes most sense. Marx, however, was concerned with the natural world only as it related to the human process of production. As a result, he concerned himself principally with economic, social, and political conflict, rather than the antipodean opposition as observed in nature. It was Engels, and later Lenin, who sought for and found examples in the material realm of forces in diametric opposition to one another. They used these examples to illustrate by analogy their conception of the dialectic in human affairs. They went on to argue that, because it was equally applicable both to the natural and to the human world, dialectical materialism was thus the more scientific.

⁴⁴ This is particularly evident in a collection of his comments on dialectics drawn from speeches in 1958, especially in his treatment of birth and death as examples of dialectical interaction (1959c:216, 219).

On Conflict

Explaining his interest in mathematics and in the natural sciences, Engels wrote,

my recapitulation of mathematics and the natural sciences was undertaken in order to convince myself in detail—of which in general I was not in doubt—that amid the welter of innumerable changes taking place in nature, the same dialectical laws of motion are in operation as those which in history govern the apparent fortuitousness of events; the same laws as those which similarly form the thread running through the history of the development of human thought and gradually give rise to consciousness in the mind of man.⁴⁵

About a decade earlier he set down three “general laws” abstracted “from the history of nature and human society.” These laws were:

The law of the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa.

The law of the interpenetration of opposites.

The law of the negation of the negation.⁴⁶

Neither in the *Anti-Dühring* nor in the *Dialectics of Nature*, from which these passages are drawn, does one find a particularly systematic application of these laws to the natural world, despite what was obviously a considerable effort on Engels’ part to become conversant with contemporary scientific developments. The *Anti-Dühring* was written as a critique of the loosely structured and wide-ranging work of Eugen Dühring. *Dialectics of Nature* was never completed by Engels, but remains a collection of disorganized notes. In these notes his approach was to draw examples for his three laws from different fields of scientific inquiry rather than to apply all three in a systematic explanation of a single science.⁴⁷ He draws examples of his first law of dia-

⁴⁵ Frederick Engels, Preface to the second edition of *Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science* (known as *Anti-Dühring*) (1885), translated by *Emile Burns* (New York: International Publishers, 1939), pp. 15f.

⁴⁶ Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, translated by Clemens Dutt (New York: International Publishers, 1940), p. 26.

⁴⁷ He indeed argues that he is not engaged in “writing a handbook of dialectics but only with showing that the dialectical laws are really laws of development of nature and therefore are valid for theoretical natural sciences. Hence,” he continues, “we cannot go into the inner interconnection of those laws with one another”; *ibid.*, p. 27.

On Conflict

lectual development—the transformation of quantity into quality—from the field of chemistry. The interpenetration of opposites, his second law, he illustrates by referring to the realm of physics. The law of the negation of the negation is demonstrated in his discussion of biology and particularly of botany. The reader is thus left with the task of conceptualizing the way in which the other two laws might apply in the scientific fields Engels has chosen to illustrate the third. For instance, he suggests that it is useful to conceive of the development of the barley plant from the grain as a “negation” of the grain and of the development in turn of the grain from the plant as a “negation of the negation,”⁴⁸ but fails to treat the question of how useful it is to think of plant and seed as “opposites” that interpenetrate, or how the law of the transformation of quantity into quality applies in this botanical example.

Lenin was considerably more direct in his discussion of the applicability of dialectical laws to natural phenomena. He devoted considerable attention to the problem in his *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, and returned to the question several years later in a briefer essay, “On Dialectics.” In this latter essay he set forth a list of examples of what he regarded as “contradictory, mutually exclusive, opposite tendencies”:

In mathematics: + and -. Differential and integral.

In mechanics: action and reaction.

In physics: positive and negative electricity.

In chemistry: the combination and dissociation of atoms.

In social science: the class struggle.⁴⁹

In both cases, Engels and Lenin made reference to the natural sciences in order to establish the material, physical bases of the dialectical pattern of development. Both wanted to show not only an *analogy* between dialectical development in the natural, social, and philosophical spheres, but an *identity*. In asserting this identity, however, they not only took a very different view of nature and its relationship to men and women from that of Marx, but, as their critics aver, they rigidified and oversimplified beyond recognition what had been, in the hands of Marx, a subtle and

⁴⁸ Engels, *Anti-Dübring*, p. 149.

⁴⁹ V. I. Lenin, “On Dialectics,” in *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, n.d.) xi, 81.

On Conflict

flexible mode of understanding the world, and of changing it.⁵⁰ In so doing, moreover, they intentionally blurred whatever distinction it is possible to make between the general category, conflict, and the particular type of conflict, contradiction. As a result, the usefulness of the dialectic for understanding nonantipodean opposition—which is far more common in social, political, and economic life than is antipodean opposition—is vitiated by the use of the term contradiction, and the consequent failure to attend as well to the complementarity of opposites that earlier, proto-dialectical observers of change in nature had stressed.

Although Mao makes frequent use of the term “contradiction,” he uses it to include both antipodean and nonantipodean conflict. In his use of the dialectic we find a dual emphasis on complementarity and contradiction. He effected this dual emphasis through his use of the principle of the unity of opposites. Here, as we shall see, however, the idea of complementarity, rather than being a permanent characteristic of conflict, becomes a “moment” in the dialectical process. Citing Engels and Lenin, Mao did refer frequently in his discussion of the dialectic to the identity of the process of the interaction of contradictory elements in natural, social, and philosophical settings. He began by citing Engels’ grounding of the theory of contradiction in the laws of motion (“motion itself is a contradiction”)⁵¹ and went on to point out, “contradiction exists universally and in all processes, whether in the simple or the complex forms of motion, whether in objective phenomena or ideological phenomena.”⁵² Indeed, he went on to suggest in his discussion of the “particularity” of contradiction that individual natural sciences are defined on the basis of a specific contradiction that constitutes the focus of the study.⁵³ At

⁵⁰ This is the argument found in the editorial comments of Frederic L. Bender in his anthology entitled *The Betrayal of Marx* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), particularly 56-59, 66f., and 82f. In making the case for Marx, the humanist, betrayed by Engels, Plekhanov, and Lenin, the rigid and scientific materialists, however, Bender fails fully to acknowledge the degree to which Marx’s own writings are suffused with the scientism of his age and thus themselves provide an imperus in the direction in which some of his successors moved. See Paul Thomas, “Marx and Science,” *Political Studies* 24:1 (1976), 1-23.

⁵¹ 1937g:280/1, 316.

⁵² 1937g:281/1, 317.

⁵³ 1937g:284/1, 320. The passage is reminiscent of Thomas Kuhn’s description of the creation of new branches of science on the basis of the breaking off of new paradigms from a previously established science in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

On Conflict

the same time that he sided with Engels and Lenin on the links between the applicability of the dialectic to the natural and social sciences, he nonetheless advanced a characteristically practical explanation for the emergence of the dialectic as a method of analysis—an explanation that reunited nature with the activity of men and women in a way more in consonance with the pattern of Marx's own approach: "In human practice—in the struggle against nature, in class struggle, and in scientific experimentation, year after year and month after month, for the necessity of living and struggle—men and women considered the laws of material reality and proved the correctness of the philosophy of materialism."⁵⁴

Elsewhere, in a particularly interesting passage, Mao suggested that the wave-like motion of dialectical development (which we will discuss in greater detail below) is a law that is manifested not only in human affairs but also in the movement of electromagnetic and sound waves. The implication of the passage is clearly that more than mere analogy links the two types of movement, though the dialectics of electromagnetism and sonics is not spelled out (1959k:175). His enthusiasm for linking the natural and social sciences through the dialectic is manifested as well in his approbation of the dialectical nuclear physics of Sakata Soichi (1964g:319 and 1964f).

⁵⁴ 1937a:5. Considerable controversy has surrounded the authenticity of this article. Arthur Cohen argued that the crudeness of the article (which, on the basis of information then available to him, he dated 1940) as contrasted with the polish of the 1937 article, "On Contradiction," proved that the latter was either a much later product that had been predated and added to Mao's *Selected Works*, or a very substantial revision of an earlier work; *The Communism of Mao Tse-tung* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 25ff. Dennis Doolin and Peter Golas published a translation of the first section of this article and substantially agreed with Cohen's assessment of the disparity between this and his other works purporting to date from the same period; "'On Contradiction' in the Light of Mao Tse-tung's Essay, 'On Dialectical Materialism,'" *China Quarterly* 19 (1964), 38ff. Karl Wittfogel and C. R. Chao found the article to be largely a plagiarism of an article in the *Bol'shaya sovetskaya entsiklopedia*; "Some Remarks on Mao's Handling of Concepts and Problems of Dialectics," *Studies in Soviet Thought* 3:4 (1963), 251-277. John Rue, on the other hand, argued that the article was actually published by Party elements hostile to Mao and allied with Moscow, in an attempt to discredit him; "Is Mao Tse-tung's 'Dialectical Materialism' a Forgery?" *Journal of Asian Studies* 26:3 (1967), 464-468. Mao added his own comment to the controversy when, early in 1965, Edgar Snow reported to him the argument among Western scholars with regard to the article. Mao's reply to Snow's query was that, although he recalled clearly the date of writing "On Practice" and "On Contradiction" because they were delivered as lectures at Kangda in Yan'an, he had never written an essay entitled "Dialectical Materialism." "He thought that he

On Conflict

He alluded to his Chinese antecedents as a means of introducing what he took to be the central tenet of the dialectic, the law of the unity of opposites. "We Chinese often say," he pointed out, " 'Things that oppose each other also complement each other.' That is, things opposed to each other have identity."⁵⁵ Explaining the unity of opposites Mao said, "the fact is that no contradictory aspect can exist in isolation. Without its opposite aspect, each loses the conditions for its existence."⁵⁶ He then went on to illustrate his point with a passage that is virtually a paraphrase of the *Dao De Jing*, and that strongly reasserts the sense of the complementarity of opposites lost in Engels' and Lenin's formulations: "Without life there would be no death; without death there would be no life. Without 'above' there would be no 'below'; without 'below' there would be no 'above.' . . . Without facility there would be no difficulty; without difficulty there would be no facility."⁵⁷ Elsewhere he contends that Engels' three laws of the dialectic are reduceable to one, namely the law of the unity of opposites. "The unity of opposites is the most basic law," he explained in 1964. "Transmutation between quality and quantity is the unity of opposites between quality and quantity, but there is basically no negation of negation."⁵⁸ Although the law of the

would remember it if he had," he added (1965b:206f.). Stuart Schram appears to have resolved the question, Mao's memory to the contrary notwithstanding, with his discovery of a set of serialized lecture notes from talks delivered by Mao at Kangda in 1936-1937. The notes were published in the magazine, *Kangzhan Daxue* in 1938, and include the text of both the article "On Dialectical Materialism" and the article "On Practice." Moreover, the notes indicate that the lecture "On Contradiction" was to follow. All of these pieces thus appear to date from late 1936 and early 1937 and, although crude and uneven in quality, apparently reflect the quality of Mao's thought at the time; Schram, *Political Thought*, pp. 85-88.

A somewhat similar treatment of the relationship between human and natural conflict—one that uses natural conflict as evidence, in a sense, of the necessity of human conflict, is found in a brief comment dating from 1964 in which he says, "ideas of stagnation, pessimism, inertia and complacency are all wrong. They are wrong because they agree neither with the historical facts of social development over the past millions of years, nor with the historical facts of nature so far known to us (i.e., nature as revealed in the history of celestial bodies, the earth, life and other natural phenomena)" (1964x).

⁵⁵ 1937e:305/1, 343.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 302/1, 338.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* See p. 8 above, where the relevant passage of the *Dao De Jing* is cited.

⁵⁸ 1964g:393. The following year he reiterated his point, suggesting that

On Conflict

unity of opposites was to be emphasized, that emphasis should not, in Mao's view, be an exclusive one. This was made clear when a serious dispute broke out in philosophical circles in the early 1960s over the question of the emphasis to be given to the unity of opposites and to their conflict. Yang Xianzhen advanced the argument that it was important to focus on the phase of two combining into one—the creation of a new stage of unity resulting from an antecedent conflict of contradictory forces.⁵⁹ Mao attacked Yang's position, both because of the political ramifications of his argument (which emphasized conciliation over struggle at a time—just prior to the Cultural Revolution—when Mao was attempting to make the opposite point), but more importantly because of its broader methodological implications. He suggested that overemphasizing the unity of opposites rather than their potential contradiction was a Hegelian error that gave rise to satisfaction with the status quo. The correct position, he insisted, was one that emphasized the moment of one splitting into two, thereby pointing up the continuity of conflict and the temporary character of unity and equilibrium.⁶⁰

As Mao's argument in opposition to that of Yang makes clear, the dialectical resolution of the apparent paradox of opposition in unity and unity in opposition is to regard the two conditions as moments that alternate over time in an ongoing process. There

where Stalin had expanded Engels' three laws to four, the three could profitably be reduced to one, namely, "the law of contradiction: the remainder, quantity and quality, affirmation and negation, phenomenon and essence, content and form, necessity and freedom, possibility and reality, are all unity of opposites" (1965j:54).

⁵⁹ Yang Xianzhen's ideas as conveyed in lectures to his students are summarized in the article "One Divides into Two, Two Combines into One," by Ai Hengwu and Lin Qingshan, *Guangming Ribao* (29 May 1964). It was refuted in the article, "A Discussion with Comrade Yang on Problems of Two Combining into One," by Wang Qing and Guo Peiheng, *Renmin Ribao* (hereafter *RMRB*) (17 July 1964). See also Merle Goldman, "The Role of History in Party Struggle, 1962-1964," *China Quarterly* 51 (1972), 500-519.

⁶⁰ 1964g:387, 392. It was not a new position for Mao, who pointed out in 1959 that the unity of opposites is to be seen as "conditional, temporary, transitional and relative" (1959c:201). Similarly, commenting on the use in a Soviet text on political economy of the phrase "complete consolidation" of the socialist system, he pointed out that in dialectical terms the phrase is erroneous, since nothing can be completely consolidated when it is in a state of constant development (1961a:262f.).

On Conflict

are points in the process of development at which struggle, disunity, and qualitative change are its characteristics; similarly, there are points at which complementarity, unity, and quantitative change are its characteristics. Although both stages are necessary to the process of change, it is the former that he identifies as “absolute” or given. The latter—complementarity and unity—are thus to be conceived of as relative or temporary.

Deriving from Mao’s conception of this dialectical resolution are two of the most pervasive metaphors in his writings: that of the wave and that of the spiral as illustrative of the movement of progress and development. “Any development,” he wrote in 1961, “is not a straight line, but in the shape of a wave or a spiral.”⁶¹ The spiral illustrates the fact that, as “things proceed from imbalance and back to balance,” “each cycle brings about a higher plane.”⁶² The wave suggests the shift between high and low speed,⁶³ between tension and relaxation.⁶⁴ “A wave-like form of progress is the unity of opposites, deliberation and haste,” he wrote in 1958, “the unity of [the] opposites, toil and dreams.”⁶⁵

Finally (and in a certain sense paradoxically, as we shall see when we move on to speak of Mao’s view of the human role in the dialectical process), he spoke often of the wave as symbolic of nature as a whole, in that it is something against which men and women must struggle in the process of pushing forward. He cited a Confucian interpretation of the symbolism of waves in his poem, “Swimming,” with the lines, “Standing at a ford, the Master once said:/ Thus life flows into the past.” But the symbolism is strikingly altered by the preceding lines:

A swim cuts across the Long River.
A glance gauges the sky’s width.
Let the wind blow and the waves strike,
This surpasses an aimless stroll in the court.⁶⁶

Waves thus served Mao as a symbol for the dialectical movement of nature in a way very reminiscent of that in which they served his Chinese forebears, but in his treatment of the posture of men

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

⁶² 1958e:7; 1958c:80.

⁶³ 1959c:202.

⁶⁴ 1958t:105; 1959c:206. Cf. 1961a:284, where he suggests that “shock tactics” are sometimes appropriate as a variation in pace to sustain the alternation between the two.

⁶⁵ 1958l:106.

⁶⁶ 1956f.

On Conflict

and women in the face of this movement, he diverges sharply from them: "Swimming is a sport," he commented in 1964, "in which the swimmers battle against nature."⁶⁷ They also served him in the same way as a symbol in his political life: in July 1966 he plunged into the Yangtze once again as a signal of his reemergence as a vigorous, "first line" leader prepared to take an active role in the nascent Cultural Revolution.⁶⁸

It is significant that Mao suggested abandoning Engels' third law of the dialectic—the law of the negation of the negation. Richard Bernstein suggests by means of a helpful analogy what Hegel had in mind in using this term to describe the process of achieving an innovation: "One 'moment' of a dialectical process, when it is fully developed or understood, gives rise to its own negation; it is not mechanically confronted by an antithesis. The process here is more like that of a tragedy where the 'fall' of the tragic hero emerges from the dynamics of the development of his own character."⁶⁹ By contrast, Mao's conception of the process of reaching a synthesis is more mechanistic than organic, perhaps because he found Hegel only by way of Engels. He describes the period of relative balance as one in which change is quantitative in nature, and may be brought about by external, as well as internal causes.⁷⁰ Conflicts during this period, he states elsewhere, "develop," "sharpen," and "deepen."⁷¹ A ruling class in decline in the face of a rising advanced class is one of his favorite examples of quantitative change.⁷² During this period of relative balance and quantitative change, the dialectic becomes, as Mao described it, a "comparative method" by means of which two aspects of a contradiction are brought together and their relative strength measured.⁷³ Qualitative change of a situation, by contrast, presupposes an *Aufhebung*—a supercession of what has come before: a "leap" in Mao's terms—to a qualitatively new situation that must be brought about by forces internal to the contradiction itself.⁷⁴

In setting forth his alternative to the Hegelian term for the dialectical supercession of the old by the new—the stage that

⁶⁷ 1964g.

⁶⁸ 1966h.

⁶⁹ Richard Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 20.

⁷⁰ 1937g:277, 297/1, 314, 333.

⁷¹ 1930a:97f./1, 120f.

⁷² 1958xx:73.

⁷³ 1958j:200; 1959c:201.

⁷⁴ 1958v:112; 1961a:263.

On Conflict

others have referred to as that of the achievement of a synthesis—Mao is at his most vague and ambiguous. “What is synthesis?” he asked rhetorically in 1937. “It is eating something up. . . . Synthesis is the big fish eating the small fish.”⁷⁵ He clarified this unusual explanation some thirty years later and in so doing made the process seem more eclectic than synthetic:

Synthesis means swallowing up the enemy. How did we synthesize the Guomindang? We did it by taking enemy material and remoulding it. . . . Those we did not use we have “*Aufgehoben*” to use a philosophical term. . . . The process of eating is also one of analysis and synthesis. For example, when eating crabs you eat the meat but not the shell. The stomach will absorb the nutritious part and get rid of the useless part. You are all foreign-style philosophers. I am a native-style philosopher.⁷⁶

What is crucial here is not only the degree to which he returns self-consciously to his own “native” sources rather than to the Western origins of the dialectic in his explanation of its most critical stage, but also the expansiveness with which he applies the concept of qualitative change, a concept that he equates with the term, “revolution.” “All kinds of mutations and leaps,” he pointed out in 1958, “are a kind of revolution and must go through struggle. The ‘theory of no struggle’ is metaphysical.”⁷⁷

In order to complete this brief explication of Mao’s use of the dialectic, we must turn to the question of the role of human actors in the dialectical process. For the moment it is important to emphasize that the dialectic—the use of contradictions as a method of investigation and analysis—is not treated by Mao as merely one of many possible methods or paradigms that can be imposed on a disorderly world to create an orderly explanation. Although any scientist, as Thomas Kuhn describes scientific activity,⁷⁸ uses the dominant paradigm of the moment in the belief

⁷⁵ 1937a:28.

⁷⁶ 1965k:238f. He goes on to suggest that this definition derives from his study of Marx, who “removed the shell of Hegel’s philosophy and absorbed the useful inner part, transforming it into dialectical materialism. He absorbed Feuerbach’s materialism and criticized his metaphysics.” His misconstrual of Hegel’s and Marx’s use of the term *Aufgehoben* here is instructive of his departure from their conception of synthesis.

⁷⁷ 1958e:6; 1961a:273.

⁷⁸ Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

On Conflict

that it corresponds, in some sense, with the natural phenomena under observation, Mao the dialectician takes this correspondence much more literally.⁷⁹ Dialectical materialism is, in his view, the one satisfactory mode of analysis because its basis in contradiction is the same basis on which rest both the natural and the social worlds. Because contradiction is ubiquitous—"absolute" to use Mao's term—the dialectic, too, takes on an absolute character. To understand how the contradictory nature of the world and the contradictory nature of the dialectic relate to human nature and to the process of human action, we must explore the third characteristic of conflict as Mao saw it: its beneficiality.

CONFLICT AS BENEFICIAL

In his speech at Marx's graveside, Engels spoke of him as having made the contribution to the social sciences that Darwin, his contemporary, had made to the natural sciences.⁸⁰ The link between the work of the two men amounts to more than contemporaneity and significance, however. Both were, in addition, contributing importantly to the profound faith in the positive character of forward movement so characteristic of nineteenth-century European and American thought.⁸¹

For Darwin, the naturalist, the concept of progress was defined

⁷⁹ To be sure, most scientists engaged in what Kuhn calls "normal science," or "puzzle solving" within the framework of an accepted paradigm believe that there is a correspondence between their models and the phenomena under observation. The normal scientist's idea of correspondence, however, is, I would argue, much less self-conscious than that of the dialectician. Moreover, there is a considerably greater belief of open-endedness in the scientist's view of his own operations than in the self-image of the dialectician. The scientist's self-image of his openness includes, importantly, a professed willingness to abandon the old methods and hypotheses if they fail to account for apparent anomalies. That this self-image is often misfounded is one of Kuhn's principal points. The dialectician, on the other hand, seldom poses questions in such a way as to make them effectively verifiable, and thus "anomalies" in Kuhn's sense of that term have little possibility of calling into question the paradigm as a whole.

⁸⁰ Engels, "Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx," in Robert C. Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), p. 603.

⁸¹ A fascinating attempt to depict the intellectual climate prior to the general acceptance of the ideas of Marx and Darwin, and thereby to illuminate the degree to which we are now affected by those ideas is found in John Fowles' novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969).

On Conflict

in terms of "fitness," where that word is close to that of an earlier form: "fittedness"—correspondence, in other words, to a given set of environmental conditions that are themselves in a process of change. When these ideas were carried into the social realm, the concept of fitness took on a more abstract set of positive connotations. Whereas for Darwin himself the process of evolution was a relatively open-ended one, those who came to be called "social Darwinists" almost invariably treated social evolution as directed toward some predetermined set of goals.⁸²

Marx was sufficiently impressed with the work of Darwin to have considered dedicating *Das Kapital* to him. It was perhaps on the basis of the fact that Darwin's work, interpreted in light of the dialectic (for it is clearly not inherently dialectical) gave material and scientific substance to the rather more vague concept of inevitably forward movement that Marx had found in his study of Hegel and the work of Hegel's students.⁸³ The dialectic in the hands of its earliest exponents in Greece and China had a triadic structure. The two complementary elements of an opposition were contained within a third element, an unaltering framework within which the conflict took place. This unaltering framework was in some instances the natural cycle of the seasons, in others the life cycle. In China it was symbolized by the *tai ji tu*: a circle within which the conflict of *yin* and *yang* is bound. In the hands of the modern dialecticians, however, the circle is broken. Conflict replaces complementarity as the dominant form of opposition; the metaphor of the circle is replaced, as we have seen, by that of the spiral, which conveys the sense of simultaneous circular and forward or upward movement. For Marx and Mao, as for their idealist predecessors, each resolution of conflict, each synthesis, marked a forward step in development, incorporating as it did only the positive elements of the conflicting forces that had given rise to it. "When one contradiction has been conquered, another emerges. The same process of competition repeats itself. In this way society forges ahead continuously," Mao wrote in 1955.⁸⁴

⁸² See Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1944).

⁸³ Bender discusses the relationship of Marx to Darwin in conjunction with Plekhanov's attempts to emphasize and build on that relationship his own ideas of the scientific nature of dialectical materialism; Bender, ed., *Betrayal*, pp. 110-113.

⁸⁴ 1955b:52.

On Conflict

This marriage of the dialectic to a Darwinesque concept of progress results in altered roles for the human actor. Within the ancient, naturalistic dialectic there are posited two roles for men and women: that of victim or passive experiencer of the forces of natural conflict, and that of observer of those forces. To these two roles Hegel and his successors added two additional ones, the one implicit and the other explicit in their schema. The implicit role is that of the defining authority—the individual who moves beyond mere observance of the conflict to a position of setting or descreying the goals toward which social conflict is to move and, in so doing, defining what are the positive and what the negative forces in that conflict. The explicit role is that of the human agent of change—the Marxist revolutionary actor who, by means of experience and intellection, moves beyond the philosopher's attempt to understand the world and seeks actively to change it.

Mao has relatively little to say on the act of setting the broad and long-range goals of social development. Indeed, as we shall see, his view of the dependence of thought upon empirical observation and praxis precludes for him, as a similar view precluded for Marx, in an important way, the possibility of fleshing out distant goals. In terms of more immediate goals, however, the role of the definer or arbitrator of conflict is more obvious. We will explore this question at greater length when Mao's epistemological views have been described, and the concept of authority that they contain explicated. Suffice it to say at this point that the implicit role of arbitrator or definer arises because of the potential conflict between the givenness and ubiquity of contradiction, on the one hand, and the beneficiality of contradiction, on the other. What is it that insures that all conflict will naturally resolve itself in a manner that fosters positive, progressive development? The deterministic side of Hegelian and Marxist thought (as is the case with the determinism implicit in the ideas of the social Darwinists) presupposes that the motor which pushes history forward is internal to the contradiction itself, and independent of the action of human agents. If historical development *inevitably* moves forward, then the conflicts that give rise to that progressive development must resolve themselves naturally, and in such a way as to contribute to progress. Just as conflict itself is given, so must the naturally correct resolution of conflict also be given. Incorrect or retrogressive resolutions are possible only over the short run, and constitute exceptions to the rule. A position such as this one

On Conflict

gives no weight to the effect of human judgment. What constitutes progress and development is determined by the conflict itself, and not by the men and women who observe and participate in that historical process.

Marx, however, was a humanist, by which he meant, in Feuerbachian terms, that men and women must be made the subject of philosophy in place of the abstractions that men and women have created. Subsequently moving beyond Feuerbach's position, he argued that the focus should be upon men and women as active subjects—as political, social, and economic actors transforming their world.⁸⁵ This humanism prevented Marx from taking a rigid, determinist position which he and certain of his successors were inclined to reject with the label, "mechanical materialism." A dialectic thus placed, as Marx placed it, in the service of humanism presupposes, I would argue, a human arbiter capable of defining the problem of human alienation, and of at least suggesting what the unalienated state of species being will be, toward the realization of which the historical process is moving. Progress can then be understood in terms of the movement toward that realization. Although, as we shall see, Mao redefined Marx's central problem—that of alienation—the need of a defining authority in his human-centered dialectic is nonetheless immanent.

To turn to the second role for the human actor added to the dialectic by its modern proponents, that of the agent of change, it is important to take note of the debate that has occurred regarding the relative importance of voluntarism and determinism in the Marxist tradition. A close reading of Marx's own writings on the subject reveals an ambiguity on the question: he speaks both of "iron laws" and of the necessity of human action to effect social progress.⁸⁶ Engels endeavored to resolve this ambiguity following

⁸⁵ Marx discussed what he then took to be Feuerbach's positive contributions to German philosophy in the opening pages of the "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" of 1844; Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, pp. 54ff. His statement of the ways in which he saw his own work as a supersession of that of Feuerbach is found in the "Theses on Feuerbach" and in the first part of *The German Ideology* (ibid., pp. 107ff., 111-164). A useful analysis of the evolution of this relationship is found in Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 8-12 and 66-74.

⁸⁶ While it is possible to find in Marx statements with a particularly "deterministic" ring, I nonetheless subscribe to the position persuasively argued by Andrew Walder, "Marxism, Maoism and Social Change," *Modern*

On Conflict

Marx's death in favor of a greater determinism. Within the framework of Marxist thought, then, there are a number of positions that may be taken regarding the role of the actor in bringing about historical development. At one end of a continuum, the human actor is seen as wholly at the mercy of forces beyond his or her control. Midway along the continuum the actor is treated as unable to alter the course of events, but at least as able to affect the pace at which they move. At the opposite end, the actor can, by actions positive or negative, affect not only the pace of history, but its direction of movement, as well.

It is possible to find Mao, like Marx, taking positions all along this continuum at various points in his writings. In "On Contradiction" (1937), for example, Mao says, "The development of things should be seen as their internal and necessary self-movement. . . . The fundamental cause of the development of a thing is not external but internal; it lies in the contradictoriness within a thing."⁸⁷ Several pages later in the same essay, however, he takes this position: "Qualitatively different contradictions can only be resolved by qualitatively different methods. . . . Processes change, old processes and old contradictions disappear, new processes and new contradictions emerge, and the methods of resolving contradictions differ accordingly."⁸⁸ The first statement presupposes a strongly determinist position. The latter, on the other hand, conveys both the idea that the "methods for resolution," even though derived from particular contradictions, are conceptually separable from the contradiction, and the implication of the need for an agent who will "apply" the apposite method. As a result, the latter statement must be taken as representative of a position far along the continuum toward voluntarism.⁸⁹ He attempts to

China 3:1 and 2 (January and April 1977), 101-118, 125-160, which sees voluntarism and determinism in Marx's work as dialectically related to one another, and thus as inappropriately conceived of as isolated, dichotomous positions, only one of which adequately characterizes Marx's (or Mao's) thought.

⁸⁷ 1937g:276f./1, 313.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 286/1, 321f.

⁸⁹ A similarly "voluntaristic" point of view is reflected in Mao's 1955 definition: "To break through and then seek balance is dialectics" (1955f:28). Martin Glaberman, in his provocative article, "Mao as a Dialectician" (*International Philosophical Quarterly* 8 [1968], 102-107), takes particular issue with the 1937 passage, arguing that Mao's position regarding the resolution of contradictions is "external and manipulative," and separates him from the Hegelian dialectical tradition. Glaberman's argument is correct as far as he

On Conflict

resolve the apparent contradiction in his position by arguing that “external causes are the condition of change and internal causes are the basis of change, and that external causes become operative through internal causes.” He goes on to illustrate his point with a homely, if somewhat too clear-cut example: “In a suitable temperature an egg changes into a chicken, but no temperature can change a stone into a chicken because it has a different basis.”⁹⁰

Applied to the social and political realms, the relationship of internal and external causation delimits the range of effective human action: “When the economic basis reaches a certain stage of development, the old superstructure will no longer correspond to it. At that time changes of a fundamental nature must inevitably occur. Whoever tries to resist such change is discarded by history.”⁹¹ Thus, “the socialist system will replace the capitalist system. This is an objective law independent of human will. No matter how hard the reactionaries may try to prevent the advance of the wheel of history, revolution will take place sooner or later and will surely triumph.”⁹² The limits are thus defined as follows: “Whatever is not needed by history is bound to collapse; it is impossible to maintain it artificially. Whatever is in keeping with the demands of history will never collapse and it will be futile to disband it artificially. This is the great truth of historical materialism.”⁹³

Looking at it from the opposite side—that of the freedom to act—he summarized his view thus in 1962: “Freedom means the recognition of necessity and it means transforming the objective world. Only on the basis of recognizing necessity can man enjoy freedom of activity. What we call necessity is an objectively existing law.”⁹⁴ On balance, then, Mao followed Marx in his tendency to regard historical development as the product of the interaction of human praxis and the conflict of natural forces.

takes it, but he fails to take account of the degree to which “externality” and “manipulation” are implicit in Marx’s recasting of the Hegelian mode of thought. Without a degree of externality and manipulation, there is, after all, no role for the revolutionary actor who, while not central to Marx’s theory as he or she is to Lenin’s, is nonetheless not absent from that theory, either.

⁹⁰ 1937g:277f./1, 314.

⁹¹ 1956n:34. See also his comment on the treatment of “unavoidability” in that article in 1957b:370.

⁹² 1960e:34; cf. 1963e:22f.

⁹³ 1959t.

⁹⁴ 1962a:180.

On Conflict

Where he parted company with Marx in the direction of assigning a greater weight to the effect of human action is at the point in the development of his thought at which, as we shall see, he came to believe that by their errors men and women can reverse the course of historical development.

In spelling out the role of human praxis in resolving contradiction and thereby in fostering development, Mao was precise, detailed, and considerably more formularistic than might be wished by those who criticize his thought from the point of view of its departures from a humanistic Marxism. He used two terms when discussing human action with regard to social conflict—"to resolve" (*jiejue*) and "to handle" (*chuli*). While his use of the term "to resolve" tends more frequently to be in the passive than in the active voice—"conflicts "are resolved," with the agent accomplishing the resolution unspecified—his use of the idea of the handling—"managing" we might say—of conflict is clearly an active one. In the context of his discussion of the handling of contradictions Mao elaborated the four crucial distinctions that he contended must be drawn in dealing with a particular set of contradictions. First is the determination of what elements in a given social situation are actually in contradiction with one another. Second is the distinction between what he referred to as "principal" (or dominant) and "nonprincipal" (or secondary) contradictions. Third is the calculation as to which aspect of the contradiction is dominant. Finally, a distinction must be made between what he refers to as an antagonistic and a nonantagonistic contradiction.

What are the relevant social conflicts at a particular time and place? Whereas the contradictions in the realm of nature that Mao and others use to exemplify their argument are compelling ones, which it would be difficult for the observer to overlook, social contradictions might appear to us to be somewhat less self-evident. Not so, Mao argued: "No matter what realm [we consider and this is] particularly [true of] a class society of course, it is always full of contradictions. Some people say that it is possible to 'find' contradictions in a socialist society. To me this seems to be an incorrect interpretation. One cannot say 'find' contradictions when the world is full of them. Nowhere do contradictions not exist."⁹⁵ Given this plethora of contradictions, it is the function of the experienced observer in direct contact with the em-

⁹⁵ 1959c:212; translation modified.

On Conflict

pirical situation—as we shall see explicated in greater detail in the next chapter—to search out the relevant contradictions in a particular objective situation. This process might usefully be thought of as one of drawing up a list of contradictions among which will ultimately be found the principal contradiction that provides the key to the development of the situation. Mao alluded to this process in 1958 as one of the “setting up of opposites”: “When we say setting up the opposite, it does not mean setting up something not in objective existence. The so-called opposite can only be set up when it is in objective existence.”⁹⁶ “What is absent in nature,” he added when returning to this subject later, “can be manufactured by man, but there must be a material foundation.”⁹⁷ An example of his own implementation of this process is found in a speech in 1956, in which he set forth the “ten major relationships” relevant to Chinese development—those between industry and agriculture, between coastal and inland regions, between economic development and national defence and so on.⁹⁸

Once the relevant conflicts within a social situation have been determined, the second distinction that must be drawn is that between the principal and secondary contradictions. Based on the goals toward which the conflict is progressing, the principal contradiction is the one that “plays a leading and decisive role,” “whose existence and development determine or influence the existence and development of the other contradictions,”⁹⁹ and whose resolution will advance society toward the next stage in its development.

The third distinction that must be made in the handling or managing of contradictions is a crucial one. Within the principal contradiction, which is its principal and which its “nonprincipal” or secondary aspect? Mao’s discussion of this latter distinction¹⁰⁰ is pervaded by an ambiguity between a differentiation based on the relative strength of the two aspects, and one based on a more abstract qualitative judgment—an ambiguity that illustrates, incidentally, Mao’s adherence to Hegel’s and Marx’s implicit denial

⁹⁶ 1958s:98.

⁹⁷ 1958v:114.

⁹⁸ 1956e. We shall return to this document subsequently in this study, since it is one that Mao viewed as his own first attempt to present an indigenous alternative to the Soviet developmental model which China had adopted at Liberation; see, for instance, 1958j:101.

⁹⁹ 1937g:295f./1, 331f.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 297-300/1, 333-337.

On Conflict

of the validity of a separation of fact from value.¹⁰¹ Mao spoke, for example, of the principal aspect of a contradiction as being “the aspect which has gained the dominant position” resulting from its having experienced an “increase in force” through its struggle with the other aspect of the contradiction.¹⁰² At the same time, however, he introduced a quite different distinction—between “old” and “new”—suggesting that in any given contradiction “the new aspect changes from being minor to being major and rises to predominance, while the old aspect changes from being major to being minor and gradually dies out.”¹⁰³ If one takes seriously the idea of the passage of time as inevitably bringing about positive change, as Mao did at this stage in his career, then what he has put forward here in the guise of what one might at first assume to be a potentially verifiable quality—that of novelty—is a distinction that in practice involves nonverifiable judgments of value, for clearly there is a pejorative sense to “oldness” which derives from this context. This implicit distinction between the “good” and the “bad” aspects of a contradiction is a crucial one, since any action that is to be taken to further the course of development must be taken by putting one’s weight on the side of (and thereby enhancing the force of) the “new” or positive aspect of the contradiction.¹⁰⁴

Finally, a fourth distinction that must be made in handling a

¹⁰¹ Bernstein’s discussion of Marx’s position is a helpful one; *Praxis and Action*, pp. 75ff.

¹⁰² 1937g:297/1, 333.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* See also, for example, 1940a:646f./11, 361f., where the young, vital communist movement is contrasted with the old and moribund capitalist system.

¹⁰⁴ The distinction being made here is reminiscent of that found in Mao’s discussion in 1938 of just and unjust wars: “History shows that wars are divided into two kinds, just and unjust. All wars that are progressive are just and all wars that impede progress are unjust. We Communists oppose all unjust wars that impede progress, but we do not oppose progressive, just wars” (1938d:443/11, 150). The Cultural Revolution provides interesting examples of situations in which, in any particular contradiction, the novel, the good, and the powerful were not always associated with the same aspect of a contradiction, as seems to be implied in this discussion of the problem of distinguishing principal from nonprincipal aspects of a contradiction. Indeed, as we shall see in our subsequent discussion, once having seized power, a revolutionary may well find that the novel is often out of phase with what is powerful and, in turn, with what he or she regards as positive.

On Conflict

contradiction is that between nonantagonistic and antagonistic contradictions—contradictions among the people and those between the people and their enemies. This latter distinction depends in turn on the second distinction—that between principal and secondary contradictions—in that the line which separates the people from their enemies is one that is drawn on the basis of attitudes toward the principal contradiction at a given time in a given society.¹⁰⁵ This distinction determines, in turn, what kind of action will be taken to resolve the contradiction—whether struggle, as in the case of an antagonistic contradiction, or what Mao calls the “democratic” methods of persuasion and criticism that are appropriate to the case of a nonantagonistic contradiction.

Under the broad rubric of the “handling” of contradictions, then, one finds a range of action which, as Mao presented it, must be taken in order for the contradiction to be correctly resolved, and for forward development to take place as a result of that resolution.

In summarizing his brief explication of Mao’s views on the positive contribution of conflict toward social development, and of the role of the human actor in fostering this positive contribution, it is perhaps useful to recall a teleological distinction made by Kant when he noted that, whereas man desires harmony, nature seeks struggle and pushes man from what would otherwise be an indolent life.¹⁰⁶ This differentiation between the proclivity for

¹⁰⁵ 1957d:80. This distinction between antagonistic and nonantagonistic contradictions is found originally in his 1937 article, “On Contradiction” (1937g:308ff./1, 343ff.). It was elaborated upon in an article written in December 1956 (1956n). He suggested in his 1957 speech that the association of the distinction between antagonistic and nonantagonistic contradictions, and that between the people and their enemies, could be traced to his argument concerning the treatment of allies and enemies in his article, “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship” (1949d:1357-1371/IV, 411-424) of 1949 and in a June 1950 speech (1950c:93). Arthur Cohen has traced the origin of the idea from its roots in a comment of Lenin’s that Mao cited in 1937 (“Antagonism and contradiction are by no means the same. Under socialism the first will vanish, the second will remain.”), through its development by Soviet and Chinese theorists prior to its enunciation by Mao in 1957 (*The Communism of Mao Tse-tung*, pp. 140-149). The comment of Lenin is found in his notes on Bukharin’s *Economics of the Transitional Period*, *Selected Works*, Russian ed. (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1931) XI, 357. Mao’s schema is reiterated in 1958p:89.

¹⁰⁶ Cited in Paul Foulquié, *La dialectique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1949), p. 97. Kant’s distinction is found in his *Idea of Universal History*

On Conflict

conflict in nature and the lack of a proclivity for conflict in humans is generally unacceptable to Mao and his predecessors in the development of the modern dialectic, as it would have been unacceptable or even incomprehensible to ancient practitioners of protodialectical thought. Indeed, there is an apparently intentional effort on Mao's part to blur the distinction between human and natural conflict. Conflict among humans is ultimately reduceable for him to the conflict of natural forces, since human purposes are ultimately determined by their relationship to material forces. Thus, not only would he have disagreed with the distinction drawn by Kant, he would have been likely to have had certain problems with Kant's view of the human psyche. The possibility that men and women may "by nature" prefer stability and harmony to conflict is a problem for social-psychological investigation. It is not an hypothesis that finds explicit expression in Mao's writings. However, as we shall see, there is implicit in a number of the tenets of the "theory of continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat" the suggestion that, left to their own devices, men and women may prefer to stagnate rather than to exist in an inherently unstable environment of perpetual conflict. The Kantian idea, then, that conflict in the physical world is natural or given, and that conflict among humans is an unnatural, aberrant condition is rejected on principle by Mao, but implicitly acknowledged both in theory and in practice. On the other hand, Mao is consistent in his rejection of the possible implication in Kant's comment that, while nature's conflicts are beneficial, conflict among humans is baneful except when instigated by natural forces.

THE PERMANENCE OF CONFLICT

In his early philosophical writing, as we have seen, Mao emphasized what he referred to as the "absoluteness" of conflict: "Contradiction exists in and runs through all processes from beginning

from a Cosmopolitan Viewpoint, and is also discussed by Kurt Singer, when he differentiates between what he refers to as a "somatic" and a "noëtic" conflict. Somatic conflict is that which results from the physical fact that no two objects can occupy the same space simultaneously; noëtic conflict is that which arises from the interaction of opposed purposes among human actors; *The Idea of Conflict* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1949), pp. 14ff.

On Conflict

to end; motion, things, processes, thinking—all are contradictions. To deny contradictions is to deny everything. This is a universal truth for all times and all countries, which admits of no exception."¹⁰⁷ As we shall see when we investigate Mao's theory of knowledge in the next chapter, any concept that is taken to be universally and eternally true violates in a fundamental way that theory. Despite this important inconsistency, Mao makes his point forcefully: contradiction, he contends, is a permanent feature of the natural and the social worlds alike. The nature of the conflict—particularly that of social conflict—may change under the conditions of a socialist society, but conflict itself is a constant.

On this particular point Mao's position became, if anything, more positive over the course of his career. As a result, he modified in recent years Marx's, Lenin's, Stalin's, and even his own earlier treatment of this question. This modification is a conceptual cornerstone, as we shall see, of his theory of continuing the revolution. Marx viewed the socialist revolution as conducted by the proletariat as a unique historical turning point. The social modifications that would be brought about by a dictatorship of the proletariat following this revolution would bring an end to classes, and with them, an end to the most fundamental of social and political contradictions, the class struggle.¹⁰⁸ He alluded only infrequently to the specific nature of this classless society, but these allusions convey the impression of an essentially static situation. Marx does not *deny* the continued existence of conflict in a classless society, but then neither does he affirm it.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ 1937g:294/1, 330.

¹⁰⁸ Marx, "Letter to Joseph Weydemeyer" (5 March 1852) in Lewis S. Feuer, ed. *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 457.

¹⁰⁹ In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels rejected the "castles in the air" of the utopian socialists and spoke of the new society merely as being one in which "in place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which free development of each is condition for the free development of all"; Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, pp. 353, 361. Earlier, in the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx expanded on his idea of the communist society: "This communism, as fully developed naturalism equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution" (*ibid.*, p. 70). I have discussed the utopian strain in the

On Conflict

Lenin had little time to devote to the study of a socialist society, much less to speculate about the communist stage beyond, prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, because his primary task was the anterior one of bringing about a socialist revolution; and after the revolution his active career was cut short by his illness and his death during the initial stages of the process of the socialist transformation of Russian society. Stalin, when he turned to the question of the existence of contradictions in a socialist society, reached an opposite conclusion to that of Mao: in 1936 he declared that Soviet society, as a result of the gradual evolution of socialism in that society, was essentially free of contradiction. Mao took particular issue with this position of Stalin's,¹¹⁰ despite the fact that he acknowledged that, shortly before his death, Stalin had modified his earlier position and had asserted that contradictions did exist between the forces and relations of production in Soviet society—contradictions that could, if mishandled, become antagonistic.¹¹¹

Prior to 1956, by Mao's own reckoning, China was still in the stage of the transition to socialism, and thus Stalin's earlier ideas concerning contradiction in a socialist society were, temporarily at least, irrelevant to China. Not only did these earlier ideas of Stalin's go against Mao's previously articulated and strongly phrased belief in the perpetuity of conflict, however, but subsequent events within the Soviet bloc—specifically the uprisings in Hungary in 1956—appeared to Mao to belie their validity. In their place Mao elaborated, as we have seen, the ideas of the continued existence and the change of character of contradictions during the socialist stage. He emphasized anew the distinction between antagonistic and nonantagonistic contradictions, and argued that, if correctly handled, antagonistic contradictions would gradually give way to nonantagonistic contradictions in a socialist society. Applied to the question of social classes, as we shall see, the implication of this position was clearly that over the course of the socialist stage, class struggle would gradually diminish in intensity.

A decade later, however, Mao came to denounce this same

thought of Marx and his successors in "Maoism and Marxist Utopianism," *Problems of Communism* 26:4 (1977), 56-62.

¹¹⁰ 1958l:108; 1958p:89; 1961a:266, 272, 294. Stuart Schram cites and discusses the relevant Soviet texts in *La "Révolution permanente" en Chine* (Paris: Mouton, 1963), xxxiii-xxxvi.

¹¹¹ 1958t:106.

On Conflict

position, which he referred to as a “theory of the dying out of the class struggle,” associating it with Liu Shaoqi. Implicit in this rejection was a reassessment of the characteristics of a socialist society with the conclusion that, far from dying out over the course of the socialist stage, antagonistic contradictions may well increase in number and intensity. The theory of continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat predicates what is referred to as a “fairly long” socialist stage fraught with “classes, class contradictions, class struggle . . . [and] the struggle between the road of socialism and the road of capitalism.”¹¹² In his later years Mao took to speaking with visitors in terms of very long historical epochs, emphasizing anew that the one element of continuity in these epochs will be the continued existence of conflict.¹¹³

This permanence of conflict extends even beyond what Marx

¹¹² 1962c.

¹¹³ Klaus Mehnert has described Mao's visit with a German delegation shortly before his death, during which he indicated that his thought had been strongly influenced by “four Germans: Hegel, Marx, Engels, and Haeckel.” The latter, Ernst Haeckel, was a late nineteenth-century evolutionist whose views on the long-term development of the universe were read by Mao in translation, and are mirrored in a number of his comments beginning in the late 1950s. Compare, for example, Mao's comment in 1959: “There is nothing in this world that does not go through emergence, development and extinction. Ape changed into man and man emerged. The ultimate outcome of mankind as a whole is extinction. Man will possibly change into another kind of thing. By then the earth will no longer exist. The sun will have cooled. . . . There are only two infinities: time and space. Infinities are composed of finites. All kinds of things develop and change gradually” (1959c:205), with Haeckel's comments: “The fate of those branches of the human family, those nations and races which have struggled for existence and progress for thousands of years, is determined by the same ‘eternal laws of iron’ as the history of the whole organic world which has peopled the earth for millions of years. . . . While many of the stars are probably in a similar stage of biogenetic development to that of our earth, . . . others have advanced far beyond this stage, and, in their planetary old age, are hastening towards their end—the same end that inevitably awaits our own globe. The radiation of heat into space gradually lowers the temperature until all the water is turned into ice; that is the end of all organic life. . . . Yet in this ‘perpetual motion’ the infinite substance of the universe, the sum total of its matter and energy, remains eternally unchanged, and we have an eternal repetition in infinite time of the periodic dance of the worlds, the metamorphosis of the cosmos that ever returns to its starting point. Over all rules the law of substance”; Ernst Haeckel, *The Riddle of the Universe at the Close of the Nineteenth Century*, translated by Joseph McCabe (New York: Harper and Bros., 1900), pp. 270, 372.

On Conflict

called the end of prehistory—the end of the class struggle. Mao explained his view in 1964 as follows: “I don’t believe that there won’t be qualitative change in communism and that it won’t pass through stages of qualitative change. . . . I cannot believe that a specific characteristic can go on for millions of years without undergoing some change. According to dialectics this is inconceivable.”¹¹⁴ The nature of the conflict and development in the communist stage may not be wholly clear, but Mao suggested that it will take the form of continued struggle between old and new, true and false,¹¹⁵ subjective and objective, the forces and relations of production, materialism and idealism, and the individual and the collective.¹¹⁶ To deny the permanence of change, he suggested in 1956, is to deny the very fundamentals of Marxism.¹¹⁷ A decade later he suggested that even Marxism itself was subject to the transience implicit in a view of permanent conflict: “Marxism also has its birth, its development, and its death. . . . To say that it won’t die is metaphysics. Naturally, the death of Marxism means that something higher than Marxism will come to replace it.”¹¹⁸

CONFLICT IN MAO’S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Having considered aspects of Mao’s view of conflict as a central idea around which his political philosophy is constructed, it may prove useful to put this view into perspective by contrasting it with that prevalent in our own approach to social questions. Here I am less concerned with philosophical schools and social science models than with our common perceptions of conflict and harmony. As I have suggested above, in these common perceptions we have moved away from a naturalistic tendency to view the world in terms of conflicting forces—a tendency which, with the exception of the nineteenth-century dialecticians, was not reinforced by the major philosophical schools in the West, as it was in China. Our tendency is to regard conflict as aberrant—as a problem that requires a solution.

Our evaluation of conflict thus tends to be negative rather than positive. Conflict is regarded as a hindrance rather than as a help to development. Conflicts are obstacles that must be surmounted

¹¹⁴ 1964q:394f. Cf. 1959c:221; 1961a:264; and 1971:41.

¹¹⁵ 1964x.

¹¹⁶ 1956d:10.

¹¹⁷ 1956a:96.

¹¹⁸ 1964r:399. Cf. his comments to Edgar Snow on the subject the following year (1965b:222).

On Conflict

before progress can be made; they are certainly not regarded as the motor of progress. Our conception of the "management" of conflict, unlike Mao's "correct handling" of contradictions, seeks to prevent conflict from hindering forward development, rather than to use conflict to promote that development.

As we have seen, Mao tended to conflate the terms conflict and contradiction. By contrast, our common language seeks to distinguish the two terms. Where we treat the concept of conflict or opposition as permitting of a range of degrees of difference, we reserve the concept of contradiction—of antithetical or antipodean difference—for complete negation, sharp, unmistakable contrast or antagonism. Because of its use in logic, we tend to view contradiction as impossible—as making nonsense of any proposition in which it appears. Far from being a creative force in the realm of nature and of ideas, we regard it instead as confined to the realm of ideas, and as constituting a criterion of invalidity. Thus, whereas we see conflict as occurring in both human affairs and in the natural world, we treat contradiction, which we consider to be an impossible condition in the natural world, as referring by extension to an equally impossible condition in the realm of ideas. Far from regarding conflict as ubiquitous—as equally characteristic of natural, social, and conceptual processes—our tendency instead is to confine the concept within much narrower limits.

Mao's position on these questions was not, as we have seen, wholly free from ambiguity. Although he took conflict as a given, natural state, he was too much concerned with the effect of human activity to argue that this natural conflict among things and among people will work itself out through time in foreordained, positive ways. Taken as a whole, in Mao's treatment of the question he held that it is a good thing, not a bad thing that conflict pervades our experience, but at the same time he argued that men and women have an active part to play in bringing about that progressive development through the correct handling and resolution of social and natural conflict. The presence of conflict in the world requires, in his view, the use of a mode of thought that reflects this conflict. As will become increasingly evident, the dialectic, or Mao's variant form of that mode of thought, pervaded and permeated his approach to virtually every question.

For Marx, the central problem with which he initiated his work and toward the solution of which that work is directed, is very

On Conflict

clearly that of the alienation of men and women in the productive process as it is conducted in a capitalist system. Conflict and contradiction in the human and natural realm—the dialectical method—Marx treated as the tool appropriate to the conceptualization and resolution of this central problem. Alienation is a problem that interested Mao not at all.¹¹⁹ Because economic, social, and political development is the problem with which he did, in fact, concern himself, contradiction, conflict, and the dialectic to which they give rise came to constitute the central idea and fixed pole around which all other ideas in his political thought revolved.

As I have noted, there is, however, an apparent and crucial contradiction between Mao's contention that conflict is absolute or permanent, and a tenet in the theory of knowledge which he based on his conception of conflict—the tenet that would invalidate any statement purporting to affirm the permanency of any aspect of human experience. We will explore this contradiction further as we turn now to an investigation of his theory of knowledge.

¹¹⁹ Donald J. Munro, "The Chinese View of Alienation," *China Quarterly* 59 (1974), 580-583. Cf. Starr, "Mao's Self-Image as a Marxist Thinker," *Modern China* 3:4 (1977); and "Marxism and the Political Legacy of Mao Tse-tung," *International Journal* (Winter 1976-1977), pp. 128-155.