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The Concept of Non-Antagonistic Contradiction in Soviet Philosophy

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ABSTRACT: The concept of “non-antagonistic contradiction” (NAC) was developed in the early 1930s in the Soviet Union to describe the social contradictions of Soviet society. This concept was employed to claim that Soviet social contradictions could be resolved without becoming intense or leading to social upheavals. The numerous attempts by Soviet philosophers to explain the NAC concept resulted in theories that are subject to decisive objections. In particular, the contradictions among the working class, the peasantry, and the intelligentsia of the USSR did not prove to be non-antagonistic according to any of the theories designed to support that characterization. The reasons for the failure of the NAC concept are not confined to the Soviet context, and suggest that the NAC concept represents an important error in dialectical theory.

IN ITS ROUGHLY 75 YEARS OF EXISTENCE, philosophy in the Soviet Union made relatively few innovations in the dialectical philosophy it had received from Marx and Engels. One of the most important of these was the concept of “non-antagonistic (dialectical) contradiction” in social relations (NAC), introduced by Soviet philosophers in the early 1930s. Soviet accounts typically claimed that NACs undergo resolution by a gradual process of merging or equalization, as opposed to intensification and abrupt transformation.

Other formulations described the resolution of an NAC as gradual, without an outburst, or not requiring either violence or

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the destruction of one of the contradicting sides. This concept (or concepts) was applied extensively in Soviet philosophical, political, and economic works up to the end of the Soviet period. It was also adopted and developed in Eastern Europe and China. The NAC concept was developed and used for the political purpose of describing the socialist system as capable of gradual and peaceful resolution of its internal conflicts as it moved toward communism, a process which obviously did not take place in the USSR. In the present paper, however, we study the formulation of this concept primarily as an episode in the history of philosophy. Since the political relevance of NACs is obvious, however, political topics will have to be discussed in our evaluation of this concept. The view of NACs advanced here is that Soviet accounts do not sustain the claim that all of the contradictions of socialist society are non-antagonistic, or indeed, that NACs exist at all.

In the first section, I review the history of various concepts of development through conflict, which were found in Kant, Hegel, Marx and Engels, European positivism and Social Democracy. In section II, I review the debate over contradiction as part of the conflict in Soviet philosophy in the 1920s between advocates of "mechanist" and "dialectical" views. In section III, I describe the early accounts of NACs, and trace the conflicting strains in the development of the NAC concept up into the 1980s. In section IV, I evaluate these proposals.

I. EARLY ROOTS OF THE NAC CONCEPT

The Dialectical View of Contradiction

In an early work, Kant distinguished two kinds of opposition, *logical* and *real*. Using Aristotle's principle that a characteristic cannot belong and not belong to the same thing at the same time in the same respect, Kant declared that combining logical opposites produces nothing at all. Real opposites, however, as in the case of two oppositely directed forces, "do not contradict each other and are possible as predicates of a body at the same time." It is characteristic of real opposites that they cancel each other at least partially, and cancel each other completely when they are equal (Kant, 1902b, 171, 172, 175).

The dialectical conception of contradiction, which was developed by Hegel and followed in Marxist thought, rejects this Kantian divi-

sion between real and logical opposition. Borrowing from Zeno, Hegel maintained, for example, that something which moves is "in one and the same now, both here and not here. . . . movement itself is an existing contradiction" (Hegel, 1979a, Vol. 6, 76).

Hegel not only asserted that contradictions actually exist, but what results from them is not nothing, but a "higher and richer" content. He rejected, for example, Kant's claim that distances covered in sailing a ship westward and sailing it back to the east cancel out. Such a journey is not equivalent to remaining stationary (Hegel, 1979a, Vol. 5, 49; Vol. 6, 62).

There are two main ingredients in the dialectical conception of contradiction. The first is an "organic unity" of two opposite aspects, tendencies, or processes. Like the poles of a magnet, these opposite sides or "moments" determine and require each other. Moments interact with each other, and some dominate others, at least temporarily (Marx, 1956f, 29). Engels described the relation of such opposites, which "exist only inside their belonging together and unification," as related by "interpenetration" (Engels, 1956a, 356). When interpenetrating opposites actively *interfere* with each other, a dialectical contradiction is present. This relationship of mutual interference is called "negativity" or "struggle of opposites." Marx's concept of contradiction does not always meet Aristotle's "same time and same respect" criterion. He asserted that contradictory sides could appear in a "process in which contradictory determinations alternate in time" (Marx, 1956f, 662), and the few cases in which he asserts that some characteristic is and also is not present appear to involve different aspects of the characteristic (see Marx, 1956b, 209). Marx was well aware that dialectical contradiction is different from contradiction in the more usual sense, which he calls "flat contradiction," and which he often cited as grounds for rejecting contradictory points of view (Marx, 1956a, 631n, 848).

The essential features of Marx's understanding of dialectical contradiction are summed up in his description of the contradictory relation between a commodity's two forms of value: "mutually conditioning, inseparable moments, which belong to one another, but which are at the same time extremes which exclude or oppose one another, that is, the poles of that value expression" (Marx, 1956a, 63).

The most important role attributed to dialectical contradictions by Marx and Engels is explaining movement and change in something

by means of the contradictions within it. Change results from movement toward the removal of the contradiction by its "resolution." A "developed relation of contradiction" is an "energetic relationship driving toward resolution" (Marx, 1956c, 533). In the course of this drive toward resolution,

contradictions . . . create a form in which they can move themselves. This is the general method through which actual contradictions solve themselves. (Marx, 1956a, 118-9.)

Marx argued that the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist system was the conflict between the expansion of the forces of production and the social relations of production that restrict them, in particular, capitalism's "tendency to absolute development of the *forces* of production, which constantly comes into conflict with the specific *conditions* of production within which capital moves and can only move" (Marx, 1956b, 268).

Marx also applied his dialectical analysis to physical processes. Elliptical motion, for example, results from two contradictory tendencies of motion, one in which a body "constantly falls into another" under the influence of a central force, and a second in which it "just as constantly flies away" in a tangential direction (Marx, 1956b, 118-9).

Generally Marx and Engels argue that resolution of a contradiction requires *development*, a process in which a contradiction becomes more intense (see Marx, 1956a, 512). The fully developed contradiction is "driven to a peak" (Marx, 1956c, 525), resulting in an abrupt resolution, as in a revolution: "[When] the contradiction has increased to absurdity: the mode of production rebels against the form of exchange. . . . [and] proletarian revolution [is] the resolution of contradictions" (Engels, 1956b, 227-8).

Marx saw resolution by development as opposed to the views of Hegel (and his idealist disciples) on *mediation* of contradictions. According to Hegel's most general treatment in the *Science of Logic*, contradictions are resolved by incorporating them into a more inclusive whole, a "higher sphere" (Hegel, 1979a, Vol. 6, 79). In this higher sphere, the contradiction is "overcome" in such a way that its two sides are altered but also preserved. This overcoming is the result of mediation, the connection of opposites together to form a

whole, and "something is overcome, only insofar as it enters into a unity with its opposite." The result of this mediating process is a situation in which a "contradiction has not abstractly vanished, but is resolved and reconciled" (Hegel, 1979a, Vol. 5, 114, 168).

Hegel's *Science of Logic* has little specific information about the process by which resolution of contradictions is brought about. In his philosophy of history he describes the development that leads to resolution as "hard angry labor against itself," which can lead to abrupt resolution and destruction (Hegel, 1979b, 76). In his *Philosophy of Right*, however, Hegel claimed that mediation could produce the result that "opposition is itself reduced to a mere appearance," preventing the destruction of the whole containing it (Hegel, 1979c, 472).

Hegel's claims about the mediation of social contradictions were forcefully rejected by Marx in an early work, first published in 1927. In part his quarrel was with Hegel's assertion of the existence of mediators which cannot play the role Hegel assigned to them; the opposition between civil society and monarch could not be mediated, he wrote, but was an "opposition set for battle" and an "irreconcilable contradiction." Marx also developed a general critique of mediation, criticizing Hegel for maintaining that intensifying the struggle of opposites, having them "fight to a decision," was "something possibly to be prevented or something harmful" (Marx, 1956d, 290, 293).

Marx claimed that Hegel's "chief error" had been to conceive of contradiction as a contradiction of appearances but "unity in essence, in the Idea," while the contradiction is actually a contradiction in essence. "Real extremes cannot be mediated precisely because they are real extremes. . . . they are opposed in essence" (Marx, 1956d, 295, 292). This idea, that a contradiction can be mediated only if it is *apparent*, rather than real, is carried over by Marx into the few examples he gives in his later works of contradictions that can actually be mediated, examples dealing mainly with contradictions within scientific theories (see Marx, 1956a, 325). In later works, Marx continued to attack idealistic schemes for mediating and reconciling contradictions (see Marx, 1956a, 21, 151, 179).

The emphasis by Marx and Engels on resolving contradictions by means of intensification is a feature of their theoretical outlook that accords with revolution, since it sees conflicts that appear small

as inevitably leading to future upheavals.¹ In general, the classical figures of Russian Marxist philosophy agreed with the view that contradictions are only resolved by becoming more pronounced. Gyorgii Plekhanov attacked Petr Struve's theory that contradictions could be resolved through "blunting," and maintained that contradictions are only resolved by becoming more intense (Plekhanov, 1976, 480, 495–499). Likewise Lenin described the course of dialectical development as "development by leaps, catastrophes, and revolutions" (Lenin, 1960, 55).

Contradiction as Antagonism of Forces

Apart from dialectical contradiction, another important view of development by conflict descends from Kant's conception of real opposition, the idea that change results from "antagonism of forces." Kant claimed that humanity develops through the "antagonism of the unsocial sociality" in human nature (Kant, 1902c, 31). Positivist writers like Herbert Spencer added to Kant's conception of social development by antagonism the idea that such antagonisms tend to die out and reach a state of equilibrium. Similar ideas are still widespread in European and American social and economic theory (see Russett, 1966; Ingrao and Israel, 1990). This outlook was also adopted by influential Social Democrats like Eduard Bernstein, Max Adler, and Eugen Dühring, who attacked dialectics and defended development by antagonism. Engels' 1878 book *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science* rejected Dühring's claim that antagonism of forces "measured against each other and moving in opposite directions" is the "basic form of all actions" (Engels, 1956b, 111–119).

Marx on Antagonism

Generally Marx used "antagonism" to describe the relations between enemies, most often of exploiter and exploited. He declared that "the bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic

1 Engels' famous formulation, that the state "dies out," might be thought to be an exception. A careful reading shows, however, that the state dies out only *after* classes are abolished, when "nothing more remains to be repressed and a particular repressive power, a state, is no longer necessary" (Engels, 1956b, 262).

form of the social process of production,” but provides “the material conditions for the solution of this antagonism” (Marx, 1956e, 9).

Marx sometimes used “contradiction” and “antagonism” in parallel, noting, for example, that some capitalist apologists claim that “there exist no contradictions and antagonisms that are inseparable from the capitalist application of machinery . . .” (Marx, 1956a, 465).²

II. THE SOVIET DEBATE OF THE 1920S AND BEYOND

Lenin on Contradiction and Antagonism

Advocates of NAC theory who appealed to Lenin’s authority could rely only on a single sentence — literally, a marginal note. A volume of the *Lenin Miscellany*, published in 1929, contained Lenin’s notes written in the margin of a book by Nikolai Bukharin. Next to Bukharin’s statement “Capitalism is an antagonistic, contradictory system,” Lenin wrote:

Antagonism and contradiction are not at all the same thing. In socialism, the first will disappear, but the latter will remain. (Lenin, 1929, 357.)

This note has often been treated as evidence that Lenin accepted or even invented the NAC concept (Mitin, 1931, 149; Mao, 1965, 344), but it surely does not show this. Like Marx, Lenin distinguished contradiction from antagonism, and this raises a philosophical question about the relation between the two. Lenin did not answer this question, however, and he did not claim that antagonism is a special kind of contradiction.

The real significance of Lenin’s comment is his political judgment that socialism is not antagonistic, in the sense that Marx had called capitalism an antagonistic system. Presumably this means that socialism does not contain social relationships that are bound to manifest themselves in bitter conflicts, violence, and the like. This

2 In a number of places, the Aveling-Moore translation of *Capital* I, included in ME, 1975, incorrectly translates “Widerspruch” or “Gegensatz” as “antagonism.” This is also true of some other passages in that edition. In an untypical passage from a late draft of *Capital*, first published in 1973, Marx uses the phrase “hostile [feindlich] contradiction” to express alienation of workers from machinery (Marx, 1982, 2014). This appears to be the only place in Marx’s or Engels’ works containing something that could be translated “antagonistic contradiction.”

was the political position that the philosophical theory of NACs was designed to defend. Lenin did not, however, invent or express his agreement with that theory.

Soviet Mechanist Interpretations of Contradiction

The main ideas of Soviet mechanists about contradiction that were debated in the 1920s can be found in Bukharin's textbook on philosophy. It appeared in 1921 and went through several editions.

Bukharin defined contradiction as "the antagonism of forces acting in different directions" (Bukharin, 1923, 77). This discussion of contradiction does not mention organic connection or interpenetration of opposites, but Bukharin soon claimed that modern physics had overcome the opposition between the organic and the mechanical (Bukharin, 1988b, 40).

In Bukharin's account a contradiction of equal and opposite forces does not produce any change at all. In this case, their "struggle" will remain concealed" (Bukharin, 1923, 77). Some of Bukharin's political analyses illustrate this kind of thinking. He argued, for example, that unity and cooperation between imperialist powers is possible only when either a) rival powers come to an agreement or b) one defeats the other. Agreement is possible only when there is "equality of forces" (Bukharin, 1924, 10).³ If the opposition of equal forces is equivalent to no force at all, then the unity of rival powers will not be disturbed until their "forces" become unequal.

Bukharin explained change as the result of a tendency for an equilibrium state to move to a new equilibrium state whenever it is disturbed. He accepted the usual mechanist view that equilibrium can only be disturbed by an outside influence (Bukharin, 1923, 75-6, 82-3). It seems to follow that the contradictions of such a system can have no inherent tendency to become aggravated.

Bukharin eventually developed a position that can be seen as a version of NAC. He argued that contradictions within the working class were distinct from both the capital-labor and worker-peasant contradictions of Soviet society. Unlike capital-labor contradictions, contradictions among the laboring classes could be overcome by "persistent and systematic [political] work" (Bukharin, 1988e, 233).

³ Bukharin denied that such agreements actually take place, since imperialists will not admit that their "forces" are equal (Bukharin, 1924, 11).

Soviet Debates about Mechanism

The most active Soviet opponents of mechanism were the group led by Avram Deborin, the most prominent Soviet philosopher at the end of the 1920s. His works and those of his students and associates, including Nikolai Karev, Ivan Luppol, and Boris Gessin, played a leading role in the controversy with the mechanists on a whole range of issues that included the nature of contradiction.

Against the mechanists, Deborinites reasserted a view of dialectics derived from Hegel and the Marxist classics: opposites interpenetrate and tend to turn into their opposite; they do not cancel each other out like vectors of force. Changes that contradictions cause result from the internal relation of opposites, etc. For example, Gessen and I. Podvolotskii claimed that

[The sides of] dialectical contradictions do not dissolve one another, do not neutralize one another, while oppositely directed forces do not prevail over one another but turn into one another, and this transition of every phenomenon, of every process into its opposite also constitutes the essence of all forms of movement of matter, a general law of its existence. (GP, 1929, 9.)

The Deborinites expounded a version of the resolution of contradictions closely modeled on Hegel's. Although he acknowledged that Marx had made a "harsh critique" of Hegelian dialectics, Deborin claimed that Hegel's dialectics "in general still expresses the real process of development, even if in mystified form" (Deborin, 1930, 339). When Marx's attack on Hegel's mediation of contradictions was published in 1927, Karev's review dismissed it as an early view, which had been superseded by Marx's and Engels' later work (Karev, 1927, 182).

Deborin described the resolution of contradictions in a characteristically Hegelian way as one in which "oppositions and contradictions lead to the formation of a new, higher, unified whole containing within itself the lower form as an aspect which has been overcome" (Deborin, 1930, 303-4). This view of development is far more harmonious than Marx's opposites that "fight to a decision" or Lenin's "development by leaps, catastrophes, and revolutions."

After years of debate, the Deborinites appeared to defeat the mechanists' views in 1929, a victory promptly endorsed by the Party's

Central Committee (Evgrafov, 1985, 253). The defeat of the mechanists was hardly decisive, however, and their ideas reappeared later in Soviet philosophy (Evgrafov, 1985, 325–329).

A little more than a year after their victory over the mechanists, the Deborinites were sharply criticized by a group of younger members of the Communist Academy. These philosophers attacked Deborinite philosophy on a variety of grounds, including its Hegelian interpretation of dialectics (MRI, 1931, 14–23). The Deborinites were criticized as “Menshevizing idealists,” who divorced theory from practice and failed to recognize that Lenin had begun a new stage in Marxist philosophy. The Central Committee also endorsed these ideas and demoted Deborin from his position as editor of *Under the Banner of Marxism*.

These events are important for our inquiry because the NAC concept was developed by the Deborinites shortly before their censure. Defending his philosophical work in debates before the Communist Academy in October 1930, Deborin claimed that it was necessary to study the different forms of development connected with the antagonistic and non-antagonistic forms of contradiction (RFF, 1931, 27). Podvolotskii went further and claimed that “without an understanding of the significance of the non-antagonistic form of contradiction, it is impossible to conceive the newly arising forms of lawfulness, the new social connections and the process of their development itself [under socialism]” (RFF, 1931, 201).

The Deborinites’ Hegel-style emphasis on the “higher unity” that results from resolution of a contradiction readily accommodates NACs. As a 1985 Soviet history put it: “If the mechanists identified all contradictions with antagonism, then the Deborinites concentrated their attention almost exclusively on non-antagonistic contradictions” (Evgrafov, 1985, 232).

Thus the concept of a distinct type of contradiction which does not tend to produce social upheavals came to be advocated both by the mechanist Bukharin and the anti-mechanist Deborinites, and survived the official condemnation of both viewpoints.

Contradictions and Bolshevik Peasant Policy

From the 1930s, the most important application of the NAC concept was the Soviet policy toward the peasantry. Thus, we cannot avoid a review of this issue.

Since the peasants were small proprietors selling agricultural commodities, the conflicting interests of the peasants and the urban workers concerning the prices of those commodities were obvious. The Bolsheviks, however, considered the poor and middle peasants and agricultural workers to be the allies of the urban working class, forming a "bond" which was the official basis of the Soviet state. The prosperous peasants (kulaks) and urban traders (NEPmen) were regarded as enemies to be eliminated, sooner or later.

The eventually official view was that the contradictions of the laboring classes versus the kulaks tend to become more intense, while contradictions inside the "bond" tend to die out. Stalin wrote that inside the "bond," there existed "a struggle whose importance is outweighed by . . . the community of interests, and which should disappear in the future . . . when they become working people of a classless society" (Stalin, 1952b, 179). Similar claims were made for contradictions between manual workers and the Soviet "intelligentsia," that is, white-collar workers with at least some higher education.⁴

The reason most often cited for expecting the contradictions between workers and peasants or intellectuals to differ from worker-capitalist contradictions was the absence of exploitation in the former relationships. Marx had already seen exploitation as a source of the antagonism of capitalist social relationships, but gave no indication whether he expected the course of development of social contradictions without antagonism (in the sense of bitter hostility or violence) to avoid antagonism in the sense(s) subsequently used in the theory of NACs (intensification, requiring the destruction of one side to end the contradiction, etc).

Even from a political stance sympathetic to the USSR, the question of whether exploitation had actually ended by the late 1930s is a thorny topic. As one former Soviet philosopher noted, any difference of class interest "means that it is possible for one social group to assign itself the results of the work of another" (Rutkevich, 1999, 24). Hence, it is impossible to decide whether or not exploitation exists in a class society without specifying the appropriate share of income for each

4 Stalin argued for this view in two letters written in 1930, but not published until the 1940s (Stalin, 1946, 20). On their basis, he was subsequently portrayed as the main originator of the concept of NAC, both by Soviet and Western authors (see Rozental', 1952, 286, 289; Evans, 1993, 54, 56). The NAC concept had actually been in the Soviet philosophical literature at least a year before Stalin wrote these letters (Stalin, 1952d, 96).

class. This is not only an inherently contestable matter, but one that was actually fought over both inside the CPSU and in the public arena.

By far the most common complaint in the public discussion of the 1936 Constitution, for example, was that unlike workers, peasants would not be guaranteed state-funded health and pension benefits (Getty, 1991, 25). In a later period, there were bitter criticisms of the income and privileges of the "nomenklatura," the upper stratum of party and state officials. In the 1980s, for example, hundreds of letters to the *Literary Gazette* denounced the wealth of the "Soviet bourgeoisie" and demanded a new "de-kulakization," destruction of the "bacilla of money-grubbing," etc. (Batygin, 1987, 172, 174).

Some opposite class interests certainly remained in Soviet society as sources of conflict even if exploitation is assumed to be absent. Even without these differences of class interest, however, the history of many scientific controversies shows that intense and long-lasting conflicts can exist even when there is no obvious difference of interest between the two sides. Most Soviet treatments of NACs simply assumed that these various factors would not be sufficient to aggravate social contradictions. Until the 1960s, Soviet philosophers and sociologists had little to say about social inequality and differing class interests, although Western and Chinese sources developed this topic extensively (Rutkevich, 1999; Matthews, 1978; PGL, 1965, 436–444).

Assertions that the nomenklatura were a self-reproducing privileged stratum or even a new class were largely ignored or dismissed in Soviet social philosophy. One author argued, for example, that there was no "new elite" in the USSR, since the average salaries of intellectuals were not much more than skilled workers' (Glezerman, 1971, 147), an argument that fails to address the high salaries and perks of top leaders. Sociological study of the Soviet elite only began in the USSR in the late 1980s (Kryshtanovskaia, 2005, 9–23).

By 1936 Stalin declared that "there are no longer any antagonistic classes in [Soviet] society," and that economic and political contradictions among the working class, the peasantry, and the intelligentsia were "declining and becoming obliterated." In 1939, he claimed that because of the absence of exploitation, there were no irreconcilable contradictions in Soviet society (Stalin, 1942, 384, 388, 458).

This official view eventually prevailed over two alternatives. In the mid-1920s, Bukharin had argued that the power of the worker's state

created a new form of class struggle, one that would result in the gradual acquiescence even of the kulaks, who "have to be reconciled to the existing order of things," along with a reduction of the "reproduction of the contradictions of our system" (Bukharin, 1988d, 186; 1988c, 79).

Leon Trotsky had the opposite view, maintaining that the contradictions of the USSR would not tend to die out unless assisted by a European revolution, without which they would increase and destroy the Soviet system:

in an isolated proletarian dictatorship, contradictions, outer and inner, inevitably grow along with its successes. Remaining isolated, the proletarian state ultimately would have to fall victim to these contradictions. (Trotsky, 1930, 15–16.)

III. NON-ANTAGONISTIC CONTRADICTIONS AND SOVIET PHILOSOPHY

There are at least three ways in which NACs were claimed to be distinctive by various Soviet philosophers: their pattern of development, the means required to resolve them, and the structure that results from their resolution. We will review some typical claims in each of these areas. Many authors preferred to characterize antagonistic contradictions (ACs), from which their views about NACs may be inferable.

The most characteristic claim for the pattern of development for NACs was that they had no inherent tendency to become more intense, but are "smoothed out in the course of struggle, are alleviated and resolved in a way favorable to the interests of further progressive development" (Rozenal', 1952, 289).

This smooth development was not automatic, however. An NAC could become more acute and even "explode," if correct policies were not followed (SY, 1932, 198–9). Such "course of development" characterizations were the basis for the first accounts of NACs.

Earliest Versions of "Antagonistic Contradiction"

The first public formulation of the concept of antagonism as a type of contradiction appears in an article by Karev in the Party theoretical

journal *Bol'shevik* in 1930 (Karev, 1930). The theme of this article was a critique of Bukharin's and Alexandr Bogdanov's conceptions of contradiction and equilibrium. As a part of his argument that antagonism of classes is not analogous to antagonism of physical forces acting in different directions, Karev gave the following definition: "Antagonism is in general that type of contradiction in which the opposite sides have become completely isolated from one another and externally confront one another" (Karev, 1930, 44).

A few sentences later, Karev makes an important addition by glossing the phrase "externally confront one another" as "striving toward mutual annihilation." Presumably he intended that this striving toward annihilation involve something more than the "struggle of opposites" required in every dialectical contradiction.

Karev's terminology recalls several classic sources of dialectical thought. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel described mediation as preventing the princely power and the interests of the individuals and groups from becoming "isolated as extremes" (Hegel, 1979c, 472). Thus an antagonism could be compared to a contradiction without such mediation. In *Capital* Marx discusses processes which "form an inner unity," but "move into external opposites," "confronting one another independently." Marx did not, however, describe the opposite sides — buying and selling — as irreconcilable, but as processes forcefully unified by a crisis (Marx, 1956a, 127).

The main use that Karev makes of his distinction is to argue that antagonism is not a necessary feature of a contradiction. In addition to antagonisms, there are also contradictions "where the contradiction itself is the form of a moving source of *comradely cooperation*." As examples he discusses the relations between the proletariat and the peasantry. Bukharin and Trotsky are both criticized for failing to distinguish contradiction from antagonism in their theoretical treatments of worker-peasant relations (Karev, 1930, 44–46).

We may summarize Karev's characterization of an antagonism as 1) a contradiction in which the two sides tend to become more sharply differentiated ("external," "isolated"), and 2) these two sides tend toward destroying each other.

From 1931 on, numerous articles and textbooks repeated the themes of becoming more intense, or being irreconcilable. Here are typical examples:

- a) Antagonism is a particular aspect of a contradiction, in which the sides are related to each other as irreconcilable extremes. (Mitin, 1931, 149.)
- b) Antagonistic [contradictions], *i.e.*, such contradictions are inevitably developed in the form of greater and greater intensification. These contradictions represent from the very beginning irreconcilable extremes. (Rozenal', 1937, 62.)
- c) By antagonism we understand the struggle of opposites which is resolved by a revolutionary outburst. (ATS. 1931, 169–170.)
- d) Antagonistic contradictions grow in the course of struggle and become more acute, until one of the opposites is destroyed. (Rozenal', 1952, 289.)

Version (d) shifts from “antagonism” to “antagonistic contradiction,” the terminology subsequently followed by most Soviet authors. It claims that in the resolution of an AC, at least one side is destroyed. This should perhaps be regarded as specification of what “irreconcilable” means: the contradiction is of such a nature that it cannot end while both sides continue to exist.

Versions (a) and (b) and many later ones imply that NACs can be reconciled. We saw above that Marx maintained that reconciliation is only possible when a contradiction is merely apparent, not a “contradiction in essence.” Reconcilability seems to imply that the opposing sides continue to exist but cease to oppose each other, or at least to interfere with each other. The interpenetration of opposites requires, however, that the character of each opposite be determined to a significant degree by its opposition to the other. It follows that reconcilability is problematic, since the loss of opposition or interfering activity should so fundamentally alter both sides that they would not continue to be the same entities. It follows that contradictions can only end when one or both sides cease to exist, which implies all contradictions are antagonistic, according to criterion (d). Because of considerations like these, some Soviet authors argued that NACs are not reconcilable, in effect rejecting (a) and (b) (Rozenal', 1937, 65; Stefanov, 1957, 131–132).

Formulations (a)–(d) give a relatively coherent picture, and express a view that was arguably not different from the concept of contradiction used by Marx and Engels. The logic of these formulations would dictate that NACs are reconcilable, have no inherent tendency to become more intense, can be resolved without the destruction of either one of its sides, can be resolved without an outburst, etc.

Later authors provided direct characterizations of NACs. Mark Rozental', who wrote about this issue over many years, asserted that "in the course of struggle, non-antagonistic contradictions are smoothed out and softened" (Rozental', 1952, 289). This lessening of differentiation and struggle sounds like a kind of reconciliation, although in earlier work, he explicitly denied that NACs can be reconciled, and used this denial to distinguish his view from Hegel's account of mediation and reconciliation of contradictions (Rozental', 1937, 65).

A Different Approach

Views (a)–(d) have in common that they define ACs in terms of the developmental tendencies of the conflicting opposites. There was a second approach to NACs, however, that by the 1940s became the more common one. This approach defined antagonistic contradictions solely in terms of the methods by which they were to be resolved, de-emphasizing the general character of the interaction within the contradiction. The most important examples of this type were the claims that ACs can only be resolved by force, while NACs can be resolved by "criticism and self-criticism."

For example, a 1940 article in the *Large Soviet Encyclopedia* makes resolution by force the defining characteristic of an AC: "Antagonistic contradictions represent that form or type of contradiction in which resolution takes place with the use of force, in forcible collision" (Stepanian, 1940, 377). The same article claims that resolution of an NAC takes place gradually, without any abrupt transition (*ibid.*, 376).

Parallel to this account is the view that NACs are resolvable by "criticism and self-criticism." In Bolshevik parlance, criticism and self-criticism described a process of discussion and debate, whose object was to improve policies, theories, or individual and institutional practices. A 1928 campaign of criticism and self-criticism, for example, had the announced aims to "disclose and eliminate our errors and weaknesses," strengthen leadership, and improve labor discipline. This was to take place mainly by criticism "from below": "We must rouse the vast masses of the workers and peasants to the task of criticism from below, of control from below, as the principal antidote to bureaucracy" (Stalin, 1952c, 138).

Not only political and economic conflicts were to be resolved in this way. Even the results of philosophical disputes like those about

mechanism and Menshevizing idealism were described as positions “taken by the basic mass of communist materialist-dialecticians under brutal self-criticism” (Mitin, 1936, 43).

Typical of 1950s treatments, a 1953 article combined these “methods of resolution” accounts: NACs can be fully resolved without violence, and without an outburst. Furthermore, resolving them strengthens the socialist system, and the basic method of revealing and resolving NACs is criticism and self-criticism (Dudel', 1953, 62). Later accounts proposed resolving contradictions of the economy, particularly matters concerning production and consumption, by increasing or adjusting the productive forces (Kozlovskii, 1954, 56; Bagin, 1969, 179).

One theme of all these treatments is that NACs do not interfere with progress toward communism. As Academician Pavel Yuden put it: “There are no antagonistic contradictions to clutter up Soviet socialist society, laying the foundations for communism, and there are no social groups or forces to oppose communism’s construction or cling to the old” (Yudin, 1963, 11).

Post-Stalin Developments

The changes in Soviet politics after Stalin’s death, such as peaceful transition to socialism and peaceful coexistence with imperialism, required some changes in the formulation of the concept of an AC. A 1960 article in the *Philosophical Encyclopedia* avoided claiming that resolution of antagonistic contradictions requires violence:

antagonistic contradictions are contradictions between the working class and the capitalists. They can only disappear when the capitalist class will, *by peaceful or non-peaceful means*, lose political power. . . . (Konstantinov, 1960, Vol. 1, 70, emphasis added.)

Mikhail Rutkevich later developed a version of this idea which eliminated violence as a criterion altogether: “. . . those contradictions which cannot be resolved on the basis of a given social order should be considered antagonistic, and, conversely, non-antagonistic contradictions are those which can be resolved on that basis” (Rutkevich, 1967, 117). This formulation goes straight to the desired political application of NACs, without explaining how they are supposed to work.

Other innovations were proposed in the course of the 22nd Congress of the CPSU in 1961. Academicians Petr Fedoseev and Mark Mitin claimed that under socialism some contradictions could be resolved by merging the two sides (Fedoseev, 1962; Mitin, 1962). Communist Party of China spokesman Zhou Yang attacked this position as a drastic revision of dialectics but this may not be so. If NACs exclude isolation and separation, then resolution by merging seems only a small step away.

In the Soviet *perestroika* period, however, one can also see some evidence of an opposite trend, admitting that it is possible for NACs to “assume a deeper character” and sometimes become “very acute, taking the form of conflicts” (Rutkevich, 1986, 17). The problem with this view is explaining why such contradictions should be called non-antagonistic.

With the exceptions noted, Soviet views on NACs did not change markedly in the post-Stalin era, and the concept continued to be widely used up to the end of the Soviet period. A major discussion in the journal *Problems of Economics* in 1986 and 1987 made extensive use of the NAC concept (Kulikov, 1986). Some philosophical debate about NACs continued, however, prompted particularly by the Sino-Soviet dispute.

The Rejection of NACs?

A remarkable incident in this late NAC debate was A. A. Khamidov's 1982 rejection of any “hybrid” concept that combined antagonism with contradiction. According to Khamidov, both dialectical contradictions and antagonisms are unities of opposites. Antagonistic opposites differ from dialectical contradictions by lacking the interpenetration of opposites and producing only destruction, rather than development (Khamidov, 1982, 58, 114–121).

More important than Khamidov's own account was his assault on the established NAC doctrines. He noted that NACs are not mentioned by Marx, Engels, Plekhanov, or Lenin. He reviewed definitions of NACs in the Soviet literature, pointing out some of the contradictions and aporias in the standard accounts that we have already noted (Khamidov, 1982, 106–121). He concluded that antagonism and contradiction are categories that do not overlap, so that antagonistic

contradictions are impossible, even if antagonism and contradiction can occur together:

A dialectical contradiction can never have an antagonistic character. Antagonism can be removed by development of a dialectical contradiction which is masked by that antagonism. (Khamidov, 1982, 126.)

Khamidov's conclusions were developed and endorsed by Vadim Semenov. He made clear, however, that rejecting the idea that a contradiction can be antagonistic does not mean giving up the theoretical conclusions that the concept of NAC was designed to support. Semenov claimed that capitalism has both antagonism and contradictions that tend to become more intense, and that socialism lacks antagonism and its contradictions can be resolved gradually (Semenov, 1987, 252). This is essentially what the advocates of NACs claimed in the first place.

Summary of NAC Views

Various accounts of NACs held them to be resolved without intensification, outbursts, the use of force, or the destruction of either contradictory side. Instead, NACs posed no obstacle to development toward communism, and were to be resolved by criticism and self-criticism or economic adjustment, within the framework of Soviet society.

IV. ASSESSING THESE PROPOSALS

One approach to assessing these accounts is to see whether the non-antagonistic nature of social contradictions is a consequence of some theory of the nature of contradictions. For the mechanistic account, the answer is apparently "yes." If all systems tend to equilibrium and can be dislodged from it only by an external influence, there would seem to be no inherent tendency of contradictions to become intense, or to be resolved by an outburst, at least without continuing external interference. For mechanist accounts, the problem is explaining why *any* contradictions are antagonistic.

The mechanist outlook accommodates the idea that NACs are to be resolved by quantitative increase of something, usually the

productive forces of the economy. S. P. Dudel' claimed, for example, that NACs were to be overcome by "gradual transition from an old quality to a new one, gradual accumulation of elements of a new quality" (Dudel', 1953, 65). On the dialectical view, however, it is difficult to explain how a dialectical contradiction between opposing groups should be resolved simply because greater resources are available. Groups can fight just as bitterly over the slices of a big pie as a small one, and ideological conflicts can be acute whether resources are scarce or abundant.

Apart from mechanist views, the abstract concept of dialectical contradiction might possibly accommodate NACs. The two views, that mediation moderates or resolves contradictions, and that contradictions are only resolved by being driven to a peak, provide alternative interpretations of dialectical theory that rest on the same basic categories. Thus we should not expect to decide which view is right simply by deductions from the fundamental categories of dialectics. We can only assess the theory of NACs by reference to what are — in the broadest sense — empirical considerations, that is, examination of a representative variety of important cases. Here we consider mainly the cases cited by NAC advocates as examples of contradictions of that type. We will see that none of these examples meets the requirements of Karev's original definition and its close relatives, although some might be resolved without force or by criticism and self-criticism.

Competitions versus Contests

In his original paper Karev gave an unsuccessful, but instructive, example of an NAC. In economic competition, commodity producers confront each other externally in the market, while in an athletic competition, the contradiction is a source of "*comradely cooperation*" (Karev, 1930, 44). It may be true that commercial competitors "strive toward mutual annihilation," but this can only count as a tendency, since the actual result is not always annihilation. Capitalist competitors are often satisfied if they defeat their opponents, and it is not unusual for one firm to take over or merge with its weakened opponents, rather than driving them out of business. Defeating the opponent is also the aim in an athletic contest. Very few contests are deliberately played to a tie. In this sense the aims of competing teams

are irreconcilable, even if the players may go out for beer together after the contest is over. The consequences of defeat may be less serious in a contest, but the courses of development of competition and of athletic contests are not very different. The two sides try to increase their own advantages while holding back their opponents, and unless one side is much weaker than the other, victory or defeat is often decided by an intensification of the struggle. This example does not even distinguish contradictions resolved by violence, since both competition and contests are often resolved without it, but some contests, like boxing and football, also require violence.

Debate and Self-Criticism

By all accounts, criticism and self-criticism excludes violence. The question we have to address is whether it resolves contradictions (when it does resolve them) by gradually diminishing the conflict of the sides, or rather by their conflict becoming more intense or the sides more isolated, by fighting to a decision. Both common sense and descriptions given by Soviet sources show that their debates often became intense. A common expression from the 1930s was “the fire of self-criticism” (MB, 1935, 146).

We can distinguish two kinds of intensity in debate and criticism. Factions and alliances, rhetorical excesses, anger, and distortions of opponents' positions are common symptoms of conflicts among people. There are also contradictions *between the positions* on theory and policy that these actors defend. Even when those involved can behave with the equanimity of Socrates, who said he was “pleased to be refuted if I say anything untrue” (Zeyl, 1987, 16), their respective positions will often tend to become external to each other — more clearly differentiated or even exaggerated — in the course of debate.

It is to be expected that these two types of intensification tend to reinforce each other, so that contradictions between positions of disputants will lead to social contradictions between the disputants themselves, and *vice versa*. If opponents advocate irreconcilable theories, policies, or factual claims, so that principled compromise is impossible, and if the outcome of the dispute matters to them, resolution of the dispute requires fighting to a decision, with winning and

losing positions. This does not always mean that some people win and some lose, however, since the winning position may win because nearly everyone comes to accept it. It does mean, however, that contradictions with features usually counted as antagonistic do not arise only when exploitation, oppression or violence are involved, but are typical features of disputes of all kinds, including those resolved by criticism and self-criticism.⁵

Workers and Peasants

For Soviet philosophers who defended NACs, the central example of a contradiction that was not antagonistic was the relation between the proletariat and the poor and middle peasantry. In the light of history, however, it is hard to argue that this relation was not antagonistic. In so far as that contradiction may have been partially resolved by collectivization, this happened in the course of an intense struggle accompanied by some degree of violence. Serious conflicts remained after collectivization, however, and Bolshevik attempts to resolve this conflict settled on a compromise that guaranteed collective farmers the right to their own plots, which meant that a large part of their income came from private production and trade. As is usually the case, compromise did not resolve the contradiction.

Deciding whether the actual developments in the USSR indicate whether contradictions were antagonistic is complicated by the question of whether or for how long the USSR was actually a socialist society. From the mid-1960s, the Communist Party of China claimed that capitalism had been restored there and that the contradiction between the Soviet people and a "privileged stratum" that ruled the country was "an irreconcilable and antagonistic class contradiction" (PGL, 1965, 443). Some contemporary Russian leftists defend a similar view, that the USSR was "mutant socialism," ruled by a "closed caste" of bureaucrats (Buzgalin and Kolganov, 2003, 57–61, 101). If views like these are true, then the Soviet state was eventually not controlled by a worker–peasant alliance, so peasant–state contradictions were not peasant–worker contradictions. Without settling this ques-

5 Some of those who had engaged in philosophical controversies of the 1930s were later executed, although often long after the fact and without obvious connection to the philosophical views they had expressed. The existence of large-scale repression hardly seems compatible with the claim that antagonistic classes no longer existed in the USSR.

tion, however, we can still ask whether peasant–state contradictions showed “antagonistic” features, and the answer is clearly “yes.”

One persistent contradiction was peasants’ diversion of labor and fodder from state and collective farms to private livestock. Writing about the 1950s, Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan claimed that collective farmers were not interested in promoting collective production of livestock because their cows “fattened up on account of the theft of collective farm goods” (Mikoyan, 1999, 577). Nikita Khrushchev, who correctly saw private production as a “strong obstacle on the path of the development of production” (quoted in Zelenin, 2000, 80), tried to solve this contradiction by requiring state farm workers to sell their animals to the state and limiting private appropriation of fodder by collective farmers. This produced a huge outcry from the peasants and resulted in the slaughter of 3,000,000 cows (Kazarezov, 2001, 335). It also apparently resulted in *less* labor for the collective farms, since peasants spent more time foraging for fodder for their private animals (Nove, 1989, 359). Khrushchev’s policy was ineffective because it opposed the class interests of the peasants as small proprietors, who responded with actions harmful to the collective economy.

Unsuccessful attempts to deal with this contradiction resulted in policy flip-flops and contributed to the downfall of several Soviet leaders, including Georgii Malenkov and Khrushchev. The state could not abolish the peasantry outright, since it lacked the resources to replace their production. From the 1960s on, however, many collective farms were converted into state enterprises, the rural population fell, and the portion of food produced on private plots was reduced (Nove, 1989, 359–361; IN, 1997, 74–81). The contradiction between state and peasantry was only resolved to the extent that “de-peasantization” — the abolition of peasant status — took place (Naukhatskii, 2003, 6–12).

Despite these symptoms of their “antagonistic” character, the usual view taken by Soviet authors was that these contradictions became intense only when they were poorly handled by the Party and government (Trapeznikov, 1981, 239, 429–436). Even if the conflicts were handled poorly, however, we still have no reason to believe their contradictions were resolvable gradually, without intensification, opposition to social progress, or outbursts, since all of these actually took place despite numerous changes in Party and state policy and leadership, and no recipe for avoiding them was ever found.

CONCLUSION

The ambiguities, inconsistencies, and false claims that we have seen in accounts and supposed examples of NACs give grounds for profound skepticism about that concept. The accounts and paradigm cases taken by Soviet philosophers to define NACs do not in fact support the conclusion that all of the contradictions of Soviet society were non-antagonistic, in any of the various interpretations of that concept. More importantly, these accounts largely ignored sources of conflict, such as the large inequalities of Soviet society, and actual outbreaks of intense conflict. In 1988 KGB head Victor Chebrikov prepared a report for General Secretary Gorbachev listing 20 “disorders” and riots, each involving at least 300 people, which had taken place since 1957. Eleven of these incidents were suppressed with armed force, and at least 375 people were killed or wounded. These outbreaks had a variety of initiating incidents, including wage cuts, price increases, ethnic conflicts, and unavailability of food, which were connected in one way or another with economic inequality in the USSR (Koslov, 2002, 305 and *passim*).

The Soviet doctrine of NACs not only drastically underestimated the intensity of conflict in Soviet society, but that error made a difference. Believing that social contradictions have no significant tendency to become more intense leads to complacency in addressing them. Not admitting the seriousness of the contradictions of Soviet socialism meant failing to recognize either the urgency of moving toward a classless society, or of the existence of class forces in the USSR that opposed this. Although we cannot argue it here, the history of the USSR and of China suggests an important conclusion, that the class inequalities of socialism are sources of profound conflicts that cannot be removed within the framework of class society.

On the more general issue of NACs, this writer’s view is that there are few — if any — social contradictions that can be resolved without becoming more intense. When contradictions are resolved, this is almost always because they have been fought to a decision. The exceptions are usually cases where some external agency has intervened, as when the buzzer sounds to end an athletic contest. It is true that many social contradictions can be resolved without violence, but their course of development and the results of their resolution are broadly similar to those that do involve violence.

Although a general defense of this view also cannot be given here, review of the Soviet case certainly is an important part of the argument that NACs do not exist, in any of the various interpretations of that concept.

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