

# From Berne to Yan'an: The Theoretical Breakthroughs of Lenin and Mao

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**Abstract:** This article argues that there is a distinct line of revolutionary epistemology that can be traced from Lenin's engagement with Hegel in 1914-1916 to Mao's arguments in 'On Contradiction' from 1937. Lenin's rediscovery of Hegel's ruptural dialectics – read through Marx – provided a distinct insight into subjective intervention, in an objective situation within which the subject is inextricably connected, for recreating the world. If Lenin did so through Hegel, then Mao's discovery worked through Lenin on Hegel. Of all the orthodox Marxist texts available, Mao was drawn to Lenin's notes on Hegel. It is clear that Mao grasped the core insight, but he also took the argument much further. This was in respect to the inherited distinction between metaphysics and materialist dialectics, which becomes in Mao's hands not only a theoretical justification for the sinification of Marxism, but also an argument against the metaphysical dogmatics, who were content to let the objective situation determine their actions. More significantly, Mao developed a new distinction between the relative identity of contradictions and their absolute struggle to come to the conclusion that absolute change is final, for it recreates the world and entails that the former conditions for contradiction had now passed. Of course, this also entailed that a whole new batch of contradictions would arise under socialism in power.

**Keywords:** Lenin; Hegel; revolutionary epistemology; Mao Zedong; contradiction.

'Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement'.<sup>1</sup> So Lenin observed in 1902, only to be quoted by Mao in 1937.<sup>2</sup> If Lenin did so through a rediscovery of Hegel's ruptural dialectics, read in light of Marx, Mao did so through Lenin's engagement with Hegel. At the same time, while Mao largely grasped Lenin's insight, he also stepped beyond Lenin to develop his own formulations. Other influences of course played a role in each case, but my study focuses on these specific aspects, since they had profound ramifications for revolutionary theory and practice. In what follows, I outline relatively briefly what may be called Lenin's revolutionary epistemology, which was honed through his study of Hegel in 1914-1915. This entailed a recalibration of necessary abstraction as the path to greater concrete involvement, and thus the subject's inescapable immersion in the objective world. The dialectical outcome was subjective intervention to change the objections

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1 Lenin 1902, p. 369.

2 Mao 1937a, p. 336, see also Mao 1937b, p. 304, 1937c, pp. 610, 650.

conditions of which the subject was a part. The longer section of my study focuses on Mao's immersion in philosophy in Yan'an (1935-1937), with a focus on his interpretation of Lenin. Thus, Mao grasped Lenin's points in relation to abstraction, theory, subjective intervention and changing the world. But he moved beyond Lenin – precisely through Lenin – on at least two counts. The first was by means of the distinction between metaphysics and dialectical materialism, which provides him with a philosophical framework for the sinification of Marxism, and enables him to contrast his position with 'dogmatism', by which he means subservience to objective conditions. The second was by developing the distinction between the relative identity of contradictions and their absolute struggle. In the process, he redefines 'absolute' to mean – in the case of a socialist revolution – a final and irreversible change.<sup>3</sup> This approach became part of 'Mao Zedong Thought' and the theoretical guide to revolutionary victory in 1949.

### Lenin in Berne

It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the *whole* of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!!<sup>4</sup>

I begin with Lenin in Berne, Switzerland, where he and Krupskaya had been in exile from earlier in 1914.<sup>5</sup> The events of August that year changed his pattern of activities in drastic fashion: the elected parliamentary members of the sizable and influential German Social-Democratic Party voted in favour of war credits in the German Reichstag. So unexpected was the decision – for Lenin – that at first he believed that it was what would now be called 'fake news'. Why? He thought that the international organisation had agreed that socialist parties would oppose imperialist war, refusing to fight and, when the opportunity presented itself, turning their guns against the capitalists.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The initial thoughts for this article arose during a 2017 seminar at Renmin University of China, where we read very carefully 'On Contradiction', in both Chinese and English translation. I am indebted to the students who taught me much about the crucial role of this essay and its approach in China today, as well as their own lives.

<sup>4</sup> Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 180.

<sup>5</sup> This section on Lenin is relatively brief, since it summarises my argument from *Lenin, Religion, and Theology* (Boer 2013, pp. 104-27).

<sup>6</sup> Lenin 1914c, p. 18, 1914d, p. 34, 1915b.

In this light, the decision of the German party – and then the other national Social-Democratic parties who followed suit – was nothing less than 'treachery', bringing 'burning shame' on the international movement.<sup>7</sup>

At this juncture, one may have expected Lenin and those who agreed with him to undertake a furious campaign, in print and in person, against the decision. But the crisis ran much deeper, to the heart of the international movement and its approach to revolution. Should one give in to the framework of bourgeois democracy and seek electoral victory, or should one challenge the framework itself as fundamentally anti-socialist, if not geared to negate the very possibility of revolution? Much was at stake, so Lenin retreated to the library in Berne in the later part of 1914 and into 1915. In this time of relative solitude, claimed from the furious activity of a revolutionary's life, he set out to understand what had happened and what the future might hold. As we will find with Mao, the opportunity to study, reflect and write presents itself unexpectedly. Events may pile on top of one another in a way one can hardly manage, but a sudden crisis, an unexpected lull, a demand for greater understanding and theoretical rigour – these and more create time and space for a thorough rethinking of revolutionary activity and its inescapable theory.

To whom did Lenin turn? He studied works on the history of philosophy and the natural sciences, Aristotle, Feuerbach, Lassalle, and even Napoléon. But above he was drawn to Hegel, especially the formidable work *The Science of Logic*. Hegel was a strange choice indeed. Despite Lenin's earlier protestations in favour of Hegel and a ruptural dialectical approach,<sup>8</sup> Hegel had by and large been ignored by the Marxism of the Second International. In response to critics who had tried to paint Marx with the idealist, if not quasi-theological nature of Hegel's method and its 'triads' (thesis, negation and negation of the negation), Marxists had worked hard to distance Marx from Hegel's harmful influence. Following Plekhanov, they focused on the 'materialist' dialectic with distinctly evolutionary and mechanistic emphases. As Bloch observes, 'Hegel was never so pushed aside as in Germany after 1850'.<sup>9</sup> Hegel's prospects were not bright, but it was precisely to Hegel that Lenin turned – so much so that he may be credited with spurring a revival of Hegel's thought in relation to Marx.

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<sup>7</sup> Lenin 1914b, p. 20, 1914d, p. 31, see also Lenin 1914a, 1915a.

<sup>8</sup> Lenin 1894, pp. 163-74, 183, 379-94, 1905a, 1910, pp. 348-49.

<sup>9</sup> Bloch 1951, p. 382.

### Subject and Object

The rediscovery was profound and absorbing.<sup>10</sup> Lenin found himself rethinking the tension of subjective and objective, in what may be called a revolutionary epistemology. He finds that 'reflection [*Reflexion*]' in scientific knowledge is not a process of drawing ever nearer to an external world as scientific understanding incrementally increases. Scientific language does not attempt to mirror a world 'out there', relying on the 'progress' of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Instead, reflection itself involves an inescapable entwinement of the external and the internal, so much so that the external becomes a feature of internal, subjective deliberation.<sup>12</sup> By 'subjective' Lenin means not the whim of individual thought, divorced from reality, but the necessary engagement with such reality.

Now a further feature enters the equation: abstraction. Subjective thought, having absorbed the external, entails a process of increased abstraction that is the basis of more thorough practice and truth: 'The abstraction of *matter*, of a *law* of nature, the abstraction of *value*, etc., in short, *all* scientific (correct, serious, not absurd) abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly and *completely*'.<sup>13</sup> Abstraction may seem to entail a process of stepping back from external reality, but it is precisely when it does so that conscious thought becomes aware that it is impossible to step outside the world 'out there'. Abstraction – dialectically – is actually the moment when subjective consciousness comes to the full realisation that it is inescapably immanent in the external world. Or, to put it in narrative sequence, the more one moves away from the world, the more one is part of the world. Conversely, the process of becoming concrete and integrated with the world requires this form of abstraction. As Lenin puts it, 'the first and simplest formation of notions (judgements, syllogisms, etc.) already denotes man's ever deeper cognition of the objective connection of the world'. Thus, the 'formation of (abstract) notions and operations with them already includes the idea, conviction, consciousness of the law-governed character to the world'.<sup>14</sup>

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 10 I write 'rediscovery' quite deliberately, for some have mistakenly suggested that this was the first time Lenin grasped Hegel's – and thereby Marx's – dialectic (Liebman 1973, pp. 442-48, Löwy 1973, Anderson 1995, 2007, Molyneux 2003, pp. 72-73, Kouvelakis 2007). A careful study of all of Lenin's engagements with Hegel reveals instead a constant (if not dialectical) tension between a ruptural and a mechanistic approach to the dialectic, which he inherited from Marx and Engels (Boer 2015). I do not emphasise here Lenin's mechanistic or 'vulgar' approach, as it is found in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908).

11 As he tended to argue not a few years earlier in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and which is the standard assumption of modern science.

12 Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 231.

13 Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 171. This is the text Mao would quote later.

14 The whole text reads: 'The formation of (abstract) notions and operations with them *already includes*

### Revolutionary Practice

All of this theoretical engagement is preparation for the key point: the revolutionary transformation of the world through materialist practice. By practice, Lenin means not a simple process of activity in the world, but rather the dialectical point that practice arises from the abstraction outlined above. This practice is nothing less than the moment when 'the notion becomes "being-for-itself". Even more, it is the litmus test of objective truth: 'the practice of man and of mankind is the test, the criterion of the objectivity of cognition'.<sup>15</sup> Thus, practice is not merely the ground of theoretical reflection, which then informs practice in its turn. Or, rather, this dialectic applies, but in a more complex fashion. Practice arises from the necessary process of abstraction, or an apparent stepping away from the world, which reveals the sheer interpermeation of inwardness and outwardness. For Lenin, the central feature of practice is nothing less than revolutionary action, a re-creation of the world. As he writes, human 'consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it'. Why? The 'world does not satisfy man and man decides to change it by his activity'.<sup>16</sup> Revolutionary practice is therefore not restricted to the seizure of power, but concerns the transformation of the objective world itself. If human activity has created for itself an objective picture of the world, then it follows that human activity now '*changes* external actuality, abolishes its determinateness'. How is this achieved? By the revolutionary agent's conscious act, which can abolish the socio-economic foundations of the world as it is known and recreate it in a new way. Or, in Hegelian terms, such a socialist world can be made 'as being in and for itself', as 'objectively true'.<sup>17</sup>

I mentioned earlier that this time in Berne, studying Hegel, was very much a rediscovery of the ruptural dimensions of the dialectic. It was a response generated out of profound crisis in the international socialist movement (much as an earlier moment in 1905, in response

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the idea, conviction, *consciousness* of the law-governed character to the world .... Consequently, Hegel is much more profound than Kant, and others, in tracing the reflection of the movement of the objective world in the movement of notions. Just as the simple form of value, the individual act of exchange of one given commodity for another, already includes in an underdeveloped form *all* the main contradictions of capitalism, – so the simpler *generalisation*, the first and simplest formation of *notions* (judgements, syllogisms, etc.) already denotes man's ever deeper cognition of the *objective* connection of the world. Here is where one should look for the true meaning, significance and role of Hegel's *Logic*. This NB' (Lenin 1914-1916a, pp. 178-79).

15 Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 211.

16 Lenin 1914-1916a, pp. 212-13. As Kouvelakis puts it (2007, p. 183), the genuine 'materialist reversal' of Hegel lies 'in understanding the subjective activity displayed in the "logic of the notion" as the "reflection," idealist and thus inverted, of revolutionary practice, which transforms reality by revealing in it the result of the subject's intervention'.

17 Lenin 1914-1916a, pp. 217-18.

to the revolution of that year). In other words, Lenin was striving to understand the crisis, to grasp what had led to a capitulation by various social-democratic parties to the imperialist war efforts of 1914. His re-engagement with Hegel enabled him to understand that these parties, if not substantial parts of the Second International, had fallen into the trap of assuming that the current situation was a given, and that they had to seek changes within this framework rather than attempting to change the framework itself. This insight may be regarded as Lenin's retrospective insight, a looking back to gain insight into the present. However, this retrospection is relatively limited in Lenin's works, which contrasts with Mao's more wide-ranging effort to understand the nature of some fifteen years of the often-bewildering twists and turns of the revolutionary path.

Lenin is far more interested in what the future holds, especially in terms of revolution and its aftermath: Russia's 'backwardness' that enables a revolutionary leap forward, beyond 'advanced' capitalist countries;<sup>18</sup> the need to 'use capitalism to build socialism' through the New Economic Policy; the Comintern as a means to foster global revolution and protect the fledgling Soviet state within the limitations of old Russia; the role of the one-party state in protecting workers needs and rights;<sup>19</sup> redefining freedom and democracy as an openly partisan approach as the way to a new universal, in which the individual flourishes precisely through the collective.<sup>20</sup> However, the most significant prospective insight pertains to the socialist revolution itself. In crucial texts, Lenin argues vehemently that the revolution of February 1917 – a bourgeois revolution – should be seized and led by the proletariat for the sake of a communist revolution.<sup>21</sup> Instead of following the 'objective' path to revolution, in which the bourgeois revolution should be permitted to mature before the right conditions for a socialist revolution emerged (so much so that power should be handed to a reluctant bourgeoisie<sup>22</sup>), Lenin urged that the 'subjective consciousness' of the revolutionary agent could act to change these 'objective'

18 Lenin 1919, pp. 307-11, 1920, p. 90. As he famously exclaimed in response to Hegel, 'Leaps! Breaks in gradualness. Leaps! Leaps' (Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 123), or in 'On the Question of Dialectics', leaps to 'the "break in continuity", to the "transformation into the opposite", to the destruction of the old and the emergence of the new' (Lenin 1914-1916b, p. 358).

19 Liebman 1973, pp. 445-46.

20 Lenin 1905b, p. 48, 1906, p. 264, 1918, pp. 152-57. Some of these texts come from the period after the 1905 revolution, when Lenin had previously engaged with the ruptural form of the dialectic.

21 Lenin 1917a, 1917b. It took considerable effort on Lenin's part to persuade the Bolsheviks to this new approach, although he also had to give some ground on the question of passing power to the soviets (Anweiler 1974, pp. 185-89, Cliff 2004, pp. 122-40, 361-64).

22 Cliff 2004, p. 93, Harding 2009, pp. 144-49.

conditions. As Harding puts it,

The revolution was not like a plum falling into the hand when fully ripe without so much as a shake of the tree. It was, to characterise Lenin's account, more like a turnip. It would swell and ripen in the ground but would take a stout pull to harvest it – otherwise the action of the elements and of parasites would combine to rot it away.<sup>23</sup>

Or in the philosophical terms of the notebooks, communism is not a stage 'external' to the subjective revolutionary agent, since communism is created by this agent. Thus, the 'external' reality of communism is entwined with, is immanent to the revolutionary's subjective consciousness. Revolution can thereby recreate the world. Conversely, the agent in question does not perceive an 'external' communism objectively, acting to bring it about, but is part of the reality that has been created through the revolutionary act.<sup>24</sup>

Let me sum up the argument thus far, with its focus on Lenin. I have emphasised that Lenin's rediscovery of Hegel's ruptural dialectic arose from a vitally necessary retreat in the face of a profound crisis. In order to understand the crisis, he turned to an unlikely source, Hegel's *The Science of Logic*. As if reflecting his own practice, he found that scientific cognition arises from a necessary abstraction from the world, at which moment one discovers the truth that subjective and objective factors are intimately entwined. One is inescapably part of the world, just as the world is part of one's consciousness. But this also entails that one is not merely determined by objective conditions, but can also act to change the ground of these conditions – hence revolutionary action. This is nothing less than a revolutionary epistemology, rediscovering Marx through Hegel. Mao too will develop such an epistemology, albeit with his own distinct approach that moves through Lenin.

### Mao in Yan'a

Things are constantly transforming themselves from the first into the second state of motion; the struggle of opposites goes on in both states, but the contradiction is resolved through the second state. That

23 Harding 2009, p. 73. Or in Žižek's terms, 'this very "premature" intervention would radically change the "objective" relationship of forces itself, within which the initial situation appeared "premature"' (2001, p. 114).

24 Lenin 1923.

is why we say that the unity of opposites is conditional, temporary, and relative, while the struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute.<sup>25</sup>

If Lenin developed a revolutionary epistemology through Hegel (and thereby Marx), then Mao did so through Lenin's approach to Hegel. But it is a somewhat distinct reading that follows a different path to Lenin's. Let me set the context.<sup>26</sup> The foundations of what became 'Mao Zedong Thought [*sixiang*]' were laid in 1936-37, to be enabled by the Yan'an New Philosophy Association from 1938.<sup>27</sup> This took place not so much in response to a crisis (as with Lenin), but after the searing experience of the Long March, suffering at the hands of the Guomindang and then the apparent about-face with the call for a united front against the Japanese. Eventually forced out of the Jiangxi-Fujian Soviet in October 1934 by the Guomindang, the main body of the Red Army traversed 25,000 *li* of some of the most rugged landscape in the world, lost 90 percent of its forces, and eventually found their way late in 1935 to a remote Yan'an (Shaanxi province). While the Long March would become the founding story of modern China – expressed in the first lines of a poem by Mao in 1935, 'The Red Army fears not a difficult expedition, and thinks nothing of ten thousand rivers and a thousand mountains [*Hongjun bupa yuanzheng nan tiaopi, wanshui qianshan zhi dengxian fendou*]'<sup>28</sup> – another problem would soon emerge: the need for a united front with the Guomindang against the Japanese.

The very fact that Mao had time to write a poem indicates a profound opportunity in Yan'an. Through the experiences of the march, he had become the undisputed leader of the movement. He may have been an able and astute tactician, if not a political leader, but he was stung by the criticism (from his Moscow-appointed opponent, Wang Ming) that he knew relatively little of Marxist theory. The next two years would prove crucial. Along with many others, Mao immersed himself in study, the result being a series of key writings and original insights. But what did they study? Given that it was the 1930s and that Stalin's USSR was the centre of the most developed Marxist theory, it was of course to Soviet sources that Mao and his comrades turned.<sup>29</sup> Apart from original

25 Mao 1937a, p. 342.

26 What follows sets the immediate context. For a broader context in China's history, see the survey by Liu 1971, pp. 72-75.

27 Knight 2005, pp. 197-214.

28 A copy of the poem may be found here: [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china\\_1900\\_mao\\_march.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1900_mao_march.htm).

29 Knight 1990a, pp. 7-8. For the deep influence slightly later (1940s and 1950s) of the *Short Course*, expressing the quintessence of Marxist-Leninism through Stalin, see the intriguing study by Hua-yu

works by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin – steadily being translated already from the 1920s<sup>30</sup> – they studied the orthodox and mature Marxist philosophical works of Shirikov, Aizenberg, Mitin, and others. At this time too the first substantial Chinese works by Li Da and Ai Siqi had been or were being published, elaborating – often significantly – upon the frameworks of the Soviet sources.<sup>31</sup> Without going into detail concerning the extensive debate over how much Mao was influenced by Soviet Marxist thought and Chinese traditions, it is quite clear that the relationship was complex and creative, albeit with a directness and concrete lucidity of style that can be deceptive.<sup>32</sup>

Above all, it was from his engagement with Lenin that Mao developed his sharpest insights.<sup>33</sup> As he commented in 1965, 'I studied Lenin first, then the writings of Marx and Engels'.<sup>34</sup> I am particularly

Li 2010. Sensationalist efforts to demonise Mao by the connection with Stalin occasionally appear (Lee 2002, Pantsov and Levine 2013).

30 Available works in translation included – to list a few – Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* and the first volume of *Capital*, Engels's *Dialectics of Nature*, *Anti-Dühring* and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and *Philosophical Notebooks*, and Stalin's *Concerning Questions of Leninism*. For a comprehensive list of the philosophical works – especially Marxist – available in China in the 1930s and the texts Mao had read, see Li Ji 1987 and Knight 1990b, pp. 150-52; see also Tian 2005, pp. 144-45. See also the insightful study by Li Yongtai 1985.

31 For the most thorough study of the Soviet background to Mao's study and development of his thought, see Knight 2005. It is not my task here to examine the detail of the extensive reading undertaken by Mao and others (Gong, Pang, and Shi 2014, Wang 1998), or indeed the nature of his annotations and engagements (Tian 2014). Amidst all the study, the key translated texts were *Dialectical Materialism* by Aizenberg, Tymianskii and Shirikov (1931, 1937, 1932); *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* by Mark Mitin 1931a, 1936a; the long entry in the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia by Mitin called 'Dialectical Materialism' (1931b), which was translated as a distinct book, *Outline of New Philosophy*, by Ai Siqi and Zheng Yili, 1936b. Three works by Chinese philosophers were also crucial, Li Da, 1980-1981, and Ai Siqi 1936a, 1936b. In particular, Li Da's massive *Elements of Sociology (Shehuixue dagang)*, first published in 1935 and reissued many times thereafter, was the 'single most important text on Marxist philosophy written by a Chinese during the 1930s' (Knight 2005, p. 130).

32 The soberest analysis remains that of Shi Zhongquan, 1987, who identifies the key ideas Mao drew from the Soviet works, his transformations in light of the Chinese situation, and the new ideas developed. I am interested in the new developments: the relation of generality (*gongxing*) and individuality (*gexing*); the argument that the relationship of absolute and relative are central to the question of the contradiction in things; two important meanings of the concept of identity (*tongyixing*); the difference between concrete and imaginary identity; and the mutual relation between conditional relative identity and unconditional absolute struggle. Later, I focus on the final item in this list.

33 In background research for this article, I was struck by the relative sparseness of recent non-Chinese works that take Mao seriously as a thinker. For a useful survey of the slightly fuller, but still rather inadequate non-Chinese work done until the early 1980s, see Knight 1986. Indeed, Knight's work remains far superior to any other study that has been done, as should clear from my references: Knight 1983, 1990a, 1990b, 2005). Holubnychy's study (1964) is also insightful, apart from a one-sided reading of Lenin. A number of works are less than helpful: Glaberman 1968, Gray 1973, pp. 32-69, Wakeman 1973, Meissner 1990, Žižek 2007.

34 Tian 2005, p. 145.

interested in the key work, 'On Contradiction', although I will have a few comments to make in regard to 'On Practice'. Both were originally part of the 1937 lectures 'On Dialectical Materialism', although they were revised for later publication in the *Selected Works*.<sup>35</sup> In the first text, Mao quotes Lenin 11 times in the original lecture and 13 times in the final version of the essay ('On Practice' quotes Lenin 6 times). Even more, references to Lenin and Leninism – apart from quotations – number 15 (20), to the Soviet Union 16 (16), and to Stalin 1 (9). By comparison, he quotes Marx and Engels sparsely (although he often refers to them). Clearly, Lenin was important. But what works? The overwhelming number of quotations – 7 of 11 from the original lecture and 9 of 13 from the final essay – come from the *Philosophical Notebooks*.<sup>36</sup> These statistics suggest a distinct importance of this work for Mao, but the test lies in which texts and how Mao interprets them. In what follows, I focus on three topics concerning revolutionary epistemology: abstraction and revolutionary practice; materialist dialectics; and identity and struggle. If the first picks up Lenin's theoretical breakthroughs, the remaining two go beyond Lenin.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Abstraction and Revolutionary Practice*

I deal with the first point briefly, focusing on the way Mao has largely taken on board Lenin's insights (which I outlined earlier). Let me put it this way: a common criticism is that Mao was an unreconstructed empiricist, pragmatist or uncritical objectivist, as a one-sided reading of 'On Practice' may suggest, with its emphasis on the crucial role of experiential investigation in the step from phenomenal perception to the qualitative leap of cognition and logical knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Statements such as the following may enhance this perception: every difference in

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35 Mao seems to have felt that 'On Contradiction' was of greater importance. So long did he dwell on the revisions in the early 1050s that it had to be held over to the second volume (in the first edition) of the *Selected Works*. In contrast to other revisions, where occasional out-of-date historical references were omitted and new post-liberation issues were included, 'On Contradiction' underwent a more fundamental revision. For the complex history of the publication of the lectures see Knight, 1990a, p. 6, who provides the first translation and critical edition in English.

36 Specifically the 'Conspectus on Hegel's *The Science of Logic*' and 'On the Question of Dialectics' (Lenin 1914-1916a, 1914-1916b). 'On Practice' contains three quotations from the 'Conspectus'.

37 I deliberately leave aside the much commented upon sections devoted directly to 'contradiction analysis', with the dialectical interplay of universal and particular, principal and non-principal (of contradictions and their aspects), antagonism and non-antagonism. Given the emphasis on the constantly shifting situation that requires new analysis and recalibration, this approach is widely recognised and practiced in China today, from politics and economic planning through to the experiences of everyday life. Since I have dealt with this material elsewhere (Boer In press), I stress other comparatively neglected elements in my argument.

38 Mao 1937c, pp. 603-10, 1937b, pp. 297-304, Gray and Cavendish 1968, p. 48, Bulkeley 1977, Womack 1982, pp. 32, 77, 1986, p. 35.

human conceptualisation 'reflects [*fanying*]' objective contradiction,<sup>39</sup> or indeed ideas must 'correspond to the laws of the external world'.<sup>40</sup> A more careful consideration – focusing on the text of 'On Practice' for a moment<sup>41</sup> – reveals a different situation. At a crucial point in his argument, Mao quotes Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*: 'The abstraction of *matter*, of a *law* of nature, the abstraction of *value*, etc., in short, *all* scientific (correct, serious, not absurd) abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly and *completely*'.<sup>42</sup> As we have already seen with Lenin, abstraction or the process of theorisation entails an integral connection with the reality of which one is a part through the very process of 'stepping away' from such a reality. I suggest that Mao has actually grasped this point, thereby redefining the very sense of 'reflection'.<sup>43</sup> The fact that he has done so comes to the fore in the resolute emphasis on the 'leap' (again, Lenin's terminology) from theoretical cognition to revolutionary practice, which does nothing less than 'change the world'.<sup>44</sup> Or, as he puts it in 'On Contradiction', theory enables one to develop 'methods for resolving [*jiejue*] contradictions', for analysing the present situation in order to 'infer [*tuiduan*] its future' and thereby 'accomplish [*wancheng*] the tasks of the revolution'.<sup>45</sup> In the same essay, the most substantial statement observes that in specific conditions (the qualification is careful and significant<sup>46</sup>), the 'relations of production,

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39 Mao 1937c, p. 629, 1937a, p. 317. Note also: impressions and concepts are 'reflection of objective things, a photographic image and sample copy of them' (Mao 1937c, p. 596).

40 Mao 1937c, p. 603, 1937b, p. 297.

41 As should be clear, my main concern is not 'On Practice', although it is relevant here.

42 Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 171, Mao 1937c, p. 605, 1937b, p. 299.

43 Indeed, earlier in the lectures, Mao quotes Lenin twice from the same source, similarly redefining the terminology of 'reflection': 'The reflection of nature in man's thought must be understood not "lifelessly," not "abstractly," not devoid of movement, not without contradictions; but in the eternal process of movement, the arising of contradictions and their solution'; 'Knowledge is the reflection of nature. But this is not a simple, not an immediate, not a complete reflection, but the process of a series of abstractions, the formation of concepts, laws, etc.' (Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 195, p. 182, Mao 1937c, pp. 597, 598). Note also the marginal comment to the (translated) work by Aizenberg, Tymianskii and Shirikov: 'Reflection is not passively taking pictures, but an active process. In production as well as class struggles, knowing is an active element, playing a role in transforming the world' (Tian 2005, p. 154).

44 Mao 1937c, p. 610, 1937b, p. 304. Indeed, Mao is at pains to point out that neither the rationalist nor the empiricist approach is correct, but rather a dialectical approach – a point Knight curiously misses in his suggestion that Mao evinces an unresolved tension between these two approaches (Knight 1990a, pp. 24-30).

45 All three of these references are found in the later revised version (Mao 1937a, pp. 315, 319, 323), but only the final one in the original text (Mao 1937c, p. 635).

46 Knight 2005, pp. 180-81. As Knight points out, the qualifications negate the occasional assertion that Mao was a 'voluntarist' (Wakeman 1973, p. 163, Schram 1989, p. 67).

theory and the superstructure' can take on the 'principal and decisive role'. This is particularly the case with the development and advocacy for revolutionary theory, for it provides the 'guiding line, method, plan or policy'.<sup>47</sup>

### *Materialist Dialectics*

Thus far, Mao follows in Lenin's footsteps, but the next topic – on materialist dialectics – draws directly upon Lenin and then takes him further. In his effort to frame the analysis of contradiction, Mao distinguishes between two world outlooks. Are they idealism and materialism? We may expect so, since this distinction had become a standard approach since Engels's study of Feuerbach and was subsequently deployed in Plekhanov's *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* and Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Mao uses precisely this framework in the earlier parts of the lecture notes on dialectical materialism.<sup>49</sup> But this particular material from the lectures did not get taken up in the essay, 'On Contradiction'. Instead, Mao deploys a somewhat different distinction, between metaphysics (*xingershangxue*) and dialectics (*bianzhengfa*). This distinction will soon become profoundly productive in Mao's hands, but first let me trace its origins.

The distinction was initially formulated in Engels's *Anti-Dühring* and then assumed throughout this work and *Dialectics of Nature*. In a few pages of the former,<sup>50</sup> Engels redefines the traditional philosophical category of metaphysics in opposition to dialectical materialism.<sup>51</sup> Having arisen with the natural sciences, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for Engels this type of metaphysics has three main features: the isolation of entities observed; the antithesis between existence and non-existence (as also of cause and effect); and their static nature.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, dialectics focuses on the relations

47 Mao 1937c, pp. 649-50, 1937a, pp. 335-36). Stalin makes much the same point (1938, pp. 116-17). Knight's careful treatment of this topic is by far the best (2005, pp. 174-83).

48 Engels 1886, Plekhanov 1907, Lenin 1908.

49 Mao 1937c, pp. 573-79.

50 Engels 1877-78, pp. 21-25.

51 Although the terminology of 'metaphysics' appears in *The Holy Family* (Marx and Engels 1845), as a way of depicting the 'speculative dialectics' of the Young Hegelians, its usage there assumes a traditional philosophical sense, connected closely with theology. Engels also mentions the distinction briefly in his study of Feuerbach, but it plays a minor role (1886, pp. 370, 384-86).

52 Engels in turn derived this approach to metaphysics from Hegel (whom Engels mentions frequently) and his effort to redefine the term as an approach characterised by either-or thinking (Houlgate 1986, pp. 100-1).

between things, on the beginning and end of existence and on motion: 'in the contemplation of individual things, it [metaphysics] forgets the connection between them; in the contemplation of their existence, it forgets the beginning and end of that existence; of their repose, it forgets their motion'.<sup>53</sup> Engels goes on to speak of the dialectical emphasis on 'essential connection, concatenation, motion, origin, and ending', shaping his analysis of nature and science in this light.<sup>54</sup> So we have the interconnection of phenomena, their history and the need to focus analysis on motion rather than immovability. Further, in *Dialectics of Nature* Engels formulated Hegel's dialectical method in term of three propositions: the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa; the interpenetration of opposites; negation of the negation.<sup>55</sup> The influence of both works was staggered. Since *Anti-Dühring* appeared in 1878, it became the work studied by all Marxists of the next generation. So it should be no surprise that Engels's distinction between metaphysics and dialectics should become part of the standard vocabulary of Marxist thought, appearing in Plekhanov's *The Development of the Monist View of History*<sup>56</sup> and Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (although he constantly needs to remind readers that he means an anti-dialectical approach as stipulated by Engels) and in Stalin's section on historical and dialectical materialism in the *Short Course*.<sup>57</sup> By the time of Stalin's text, *Dialectics of Nature* had also been published (1925), so the key propositions of dialectical materialism in contrast to metaphysics become: the interconnectedness of phenomena; the constant motion of dialectical change; and the dialectic of quantitative and qualitative change.<sup>58</sup>

When Mao came to his period of careful study in Yan'an, these positions were very much part of the authoritative and orthodox Marxist tradition.<sup>59</sup> The key works by Engels, Lenin and Stalin were also available

53 Engels 1877-78, p. 23.

54 Engels 1877-78, pp. 53, 111-13, 131-32, 134, 1873-82, pp. 313, 321-27, 340-42, 354, 365, 434, 449-50, 485-86, 491-98, 501, 513, 532-33, 543-45, 551, 557, 593, 633-34.

55 Engels 1873-82, p. 356.

56 Plekhanov 1895, pp. 539-43.

57 Stalin 1938, pp. 106-9. Stalin explicitly quotes *Dialectics of Nature* and *Anti-Dühring*, especially where Engels is drawing from Hegel (Engels 1873-82, pp. 327, 358-59, 1877-78, pp. 23-24).

58 Significantly, Stalin adds a fourth feature: the importance of internal contradictions inherent in all things. This feature is drawn not from Engels but from Lenin's arguments in the philosophical notebooks (Stalin 1938, p. 109).

59 For a careful analysis of how this orthodoxy came about, precisely through debate and the exercise of political power in the Soviet Union, see Knight 2005, pp. 25-28.

in Chinese translation (although the *Short Course* was published only in 1938). Yet – and this is crucial – Mao does not cite them for his argument. Instead, he cites Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*. Why? A more general reason is that the material available from the Soviet Union focused heavily on Lenin and the interpretation of his works (especially in debates). But this does not explain the use of this particular work by Lenin. So let us consider Mao’s interpretation. In the final essay, he quotes Lenin as follows: ‘The two basic (or two possible? or two historically observable?) conceptions of development (evolution) are: development as decrease and increase, as repetition, and development as a unity of opposites (the division of a unity into mutually exclusive opposites and their reciprocal relation)’.<sup>60</sup> Lenin does not here explicitly evoke the distinction between dialectics and metaphysics, although Mao interprets Lenin in this light. The reason is that Mao has a specific interest in how the distinction may be interpreted.

For Mao – following this text from Lenin – metaphysics means that things are isolated (*guli*) and static (*jingzhi*) or immutable (*bubianhuade*). Thus the metaphysicians ‘contend that a thing can only keep on repeating itself as the same kind of thing and cannot change into anything different’ – whether capitalist forms of exploitation or traditional Chinese society.<sup>61</sup> Thus far we are on familiar ground, having seen such points in Engels. But now Mao takes the argument a step further, drawing upon Lenin’s reengagement with Hegel. For the metaphysicians, the motive (*tuidong*) and fundamental cause (*genben yuanyin*) is external, whether climate, geography, invasion, colonialism, and so on.<sup>62</sup> Such an approach gives rise to increase and decrease, in scale and quantity. By contrast, a dialectical approach sees the cause of change as internal (*neibu*), as self-movement (*zijideyundong*). In this case, the reason for change concerns the processes of contradiction. Even so, the relations between external and internal are dialectical, for Mao is fully aware of the standard position concerning quantitative and qualitative change. Thus, external forces of change arise originally from internal dynamics, they can provide the context for internal change, and they even become operational through internal causes.

But why is Mao interested in developing the argument in this particular way? I propose two reasons. First, he is seeking a solid

60 Mao 1937a, p. 312, Lenin 1914-1916b, p. 358.

61 Mao 1937a, p. 312.

62 At this point, Mao is exegeting Lenin’s succinct two paragraphs on motive force and self-movement (Lenin 1914-1916b, p. 358). Although the two specific quotations do not appear in the original lectures, it is clear that Mao was working with the same text, so the later addition of the quotations merely makes this reality explicit.

philosophical point within Marxism for what would become known as the ‘sinification of Marxism’. At this point, he writes:

The October Socialist Revolution ushered in a new epoch in world history as well as in Russian history. It exerted influence on internal changes in the other countries in the world and, similarly and in a particularly profound way, on internal changes in China. These changes, however, were effected through the inner laws of development of these countries, China included.<sup>63</sup>

Even with a socialist revolution, there may all manner of external influences and assistance at many levels, but a revolution would not take place without the primacy of the internal dynamics and contradictions of a particular location. Although this specific section does not appear in the original lectures, Mao was developing this position at the time, as indicated by the statement from the following year concerning the ‘sinification’ or ‘transformation into Chinese [*zhongguohua*] of Marxism and the need to pay careful attention to Chinese characteristics and specific features (*zhongguo tedian* and *zhongguo texing*).<sup>64</sup>

I suggest that this reading offers a distinct turn on Lenin’s insight concerning subjective entwinement with and transformation of the world (which I discussed earlier). In ‘On the Question of Dialectics’, this argument becomes the importance of ‘self-movement’. If movement’s source is seen as external, it is ‘lifeless, pale and dry’. But a focus on ‘self-movement’, on internal causation, is living, for ‘it alone furnishes the key to the “leaps,” to the “break in continuity,” to the “transformation into the opposite,” to the destruction of the old and the emergence of the new’.<sup>65</sup> Obviously, this is a revolutionary reading of Hegel, which Mao takes in his own direction for understanding the Chinese situation.

The second reason for Mao’s emphasis concerns the issue of dogmatism. On this matter, there is a shift between the lecture notes and the final version of the essay. In the original, the focus is much more on debates in the Soviet Union, with the Deborin school (and indeed Bukharin and Trotsky) coming in for sharp criticism.<sup>66</sup> In the latter, Deborin still appears, but as a signal for ‘dogmatism’ within the Chinese communist party, which now garners most attention. In other

63 Mao 1937a, p. 314.

64 Mao 1938, p. 539. The soberest assessments of the ‘sinification’ or ‘Chinese transformation’ of Marxism remain those of Knight 1983, 1990b, 2005, pp. 165-69, 205-9. See also the useful treatments in Zhang 2016. By contrast, Schram’s approach, 1989, pp. 69-84, plays down Marxism and turns Mao into another Chinese political thinker.

65 Lenin 1914-1916b, p. 358.

66 For a useful outline of Deborin’s position, in opposition to the ‘mechanists’, see Weston 2008, pp. 435-36.

words, the shift is towards internal struggles in China – as one would expect in light of the argument for internal motive force. There is no need to go into the details of the Soviet debates, for I am interested in the way Mao characterises Deborin: since contradictions appear only later in a process, the causes of change must be external rather than internal, thereby producing ‘metaphysical theories of external causality and of mechanism’.<sup>67</sup> In his revisions for the later publication, Mao adds this crucial connection: since the Deborin school has influenced the Communist Party of China, ‘it cannot be said that the dogmatist thinking in our Party is unrelated to the approach of that school’.<sup>68</sup> As a result, he makes explicit that one his main targets in the essay was the eradication of dogmatist thinking.

So we have a line from Deborin the metaphysician to dogmatism. But what does Mao mean by dogmatism (*jiatiao zhuyi*)? It uses ‘purely abstract unfathomable formulas [*chunci chouxiang de gongshi*]’, always using ‘stereotypes devoid of content [*kongdong wuwu de bagu*]<sup>69</sup> *diao*’. More fully, the dogmatists do not understand that conditions change and that different methods are needed for solving contradictions; ‘on the contrary, they invariably adopt what they imagine to be an unalterable formula and arbitrarily apply it everywhere [*qianpian yilü di shiyong yi zhong zi yiwei buke gaibian de gongshi dao chu ying tao*], which only causes setbacks to the revolution or makes a sorry mess of what was originally well done’.<sup>70</sup> In his own distinct way, Mao has come to a conclusion comparable to Lenin’s criticism of the apparent givenness of objective conditions. For Lenin, the assumption that one must allow a bourgeois revolution to mature before a socialist revolution was anathema for a properly dialectical and revolutionary approach. Instead, one should act to change the very conditions under which such stages operate. In Mao’s terms, the dogmatists operate in a similar way. As ‘metaphysicians’ with their unchanging formula and stereotypical

67 Mao 1937c, p. 630, 1937a, p. 318.

68 Mao 1937a, p. 311

69 The *bagu* was the ‘eight-legged’ essay, typical of the old civil service examinations. It had become the proverbial phrase for stereotypical and rigid writing, saying little. Elsewhere, Mao inveighs against such writing and thought as characteristic of dogmatism: Mao 1942a, 1942b, 1942c, 1942d.

70 Mao 1937a, pp. 321, 323, 322. Note also: ‘It is only the reactionary ruling classes of the past and present and the metaphysicians in their service who regard opposites not as living, conditional, mobile and transforming themselves into one another, but as dead and rigid, and they propagate this fallacy everywhere to delude the masses of the people, thus seeking to perpetuate their rule. The task of Communists is to expose the fallacies of the reactionaries and metaphysicians, to propagate the dialectics inherent in things, and so accelerate the transformation of things and achieve the goal of revolution’ (Mao 1937a, p. 340).

thinking, they become advocates for the eternality of the current conditions, offering perhaps incremental and quantitative change, but nothing revolutionary. Failure to understand the complexity of changing conditions, if not the constant shifts in the relations between and within contradictions, means that one becomes stuck in the current rut and makes a mess of the revolution. The theoretical breakthrough may have followed Mao’s characteristic way of thinking, but the outcome is analogous to Lenin’s rediscovery of a ruptural dialectics in 1914. As I mentioned earlier, for Mao a dialectical approach to contradictions enables one to ‘infer the future’, ‘resolve the contradiction’, and ‘accomplish the task of revolution’.

### *Identity, Struggle and Revolutionary Transformation*

The final breakthrough entails a step well beyond Lenin, which takes place precisely through a careful exegesis of Lenin’s texts from the *Philosophical Notebooks*. It appears in section five of the study of contradiction and, in this case too, we find some intriguing divergences between the original lectures and the final version (apart from minor stylistic touches, clarifications and references to specific political developments). In both texts, the argument begins by quoting Lenin on the necessary interconnection and interpermeation of contradictions, with the correlate that in certain conditions one aspect of a contradiction will transform into its opposite.<sup>71</sup> At this point, the two texts offer a series of examples to illustrate such transformation, although they actually fall into two types. The first concerns perpetual shifts from one to the other: death and life, above and below, fortune and misfortune, war and peace, acquiring and losing. The second type initially appears to be similar: proletariat and bourgeoisie (from ruled to ruler and vice versa), peasant and landlord, colonised and colonisers, private property and public property.<sup>72</sup> Here a problem arises, for Mao would not be one to advocate constant changes between proletariat

71 The text from Lenin reads: ‘*Dialectics* is the teaching which shows how *Opposites* can be and how they happen to be (how they become) *identical*, – under what conditions they are identical, becoming transformed into one another, – why the human mind should grasp these opposites not as dead, rigid, but as living, conditional, mobile, becoming transformed into one another’ (Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 109, Mao 1937c, p. 651, 1937a, p. 337). One difference between the lectures and the final text is the change between *yuanjia* (enemy, antagonist, adversary) and *maodun* (contradiction). There is a greater preponderance of the first term in the lectures.

72 A collection of oppositions mentioned in the original lectures has a somewhat different character, for they concern the necessity of realising the one through the other. They include: the national and international dimensions of the communist movement; freedom and unfreedom; democratic centralism; retreat and advance; defence and attack; orders and freedom of action; individual interest and group decision and so on (Mao 1937c, pp. 654-57). Given the different nature of these contradictions, Mao decided to leave this section out of the final version.

and bourgeoisie, or indeed between peasant and landlord. How does he attempt to resolve this problem? To begin with, he is careful to specify – repeatedly – that these shifts take place only ‘under certain conditions’. Initially, he means that some common basis must exist for the change to take place,<sup>73</sup> but I suggest another dimension, which arises in his subsequent treatment of conditional relative identity and unconditional absolute change.

On this topic, Mao quotes Lenin once again and then exegetes the passage in a rather unique fashion. The text from Lenin reads: ‘The unity (coincidence, identity, equal action) of opposites is conditional, temporary, transitory, relative. The struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, just as development and motion are absolute’.<sup>74</sup> However, the exegeses contained in the two textual versions diverge somewhat. Let me put it this way: in the lectures, Mao is torn between two meanings of ‘absolute [*juedui*]’. He tends to read it in terms of what is ceaseless (*wuxiuzhi*) and eternal (*yongheng*). This understanding appears particularly in his use – once again – of the life-death example. Thus, the condition of life and death in an organism is temporary and conditional, while the incompatibility between life and death is unconditional and eternal.<sup>75</sup> But he struggles somewhat with his next example, that of the proletariat and bourgeoisie. Under the conditions of capitalism, the two classes rely on each other. Yet, once the limits of capitalism are exceeded, breaches or ruptures emerge, which can lead to revolution. At this point, Mao’s sentences betray a tension, through which the terms begin to migrate. Given that the reliance of the two classes on one another depends on the conditions of capitalism, one would expect that this situation is contingent and relative, with a focus on identity and coexistence. But no, for the ‘struggle of both sides is continual’, which ‘lays the ground for a sudden change’. Now we face a problem, for it was the eternal and ceaseless struggle that characterised the absolute (and not relative) state of contradiction in his example of life and death. In the case of class struggle, the absolute is a little different: ‘Under given conditions, the two classes also change from one to the other, such that the exploiters change into the exploited and the exploited change into the exploiters, and capitalist society is transformed into a socialist society’. But what type of change is this?

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73 Thus stone and chicken or indeed the French bourgeois revolution and the failure of a socialist revolution (Paris Commune) indicate the absence of the necessary conditions: Mao 1937c, p. 658, 1937a, p. 341.

74 Lenin 1914-1916b, p. 358. The following analysis focuses on both texts by Mao: 1937c, pp. 559-63, 1937a, pp. 342-43.

75 Mao 1937c, pp. 661-62.

Is it eternal and unceasing? If so, then Mao faces the conclusion that a socialist revolution could be undone in a constant process of the transformation of opposites, indeed that the struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat would continue under socialism. But he does not use the terminology of ‘constant’, ‘ceaseless’ and ‘eternal’ when he discusses the socialist revolution. Instead, he speaks of what is ‘unconditional, absolute, and inevitable’.

I propose that these linguistic tensions betray a struggle over his understanding of ‘absolute [*juedui*]’. By the time of revision for publication, he eventually came to clarify the meaning, excising the examples of life and death and class struggle. In their place, he offers a succinct definition of ‘relative [*xiangdui*]’ and ‘absolute [*juedui*]’ by connecting them with a series of further terms, now understood as types of motion. Thus, what is relative is at rest (*jingzhi*), while the absolute is signalled by conspicuous, outstanding or significant (*xianzhu*) change. Further, relative rest involves quantitative (*shuliang*) change, while the absolute concerns qualitative (*xingzhi*) change. Finally, the quantitative change of relative rest involves unity or integration (*tongyi*), while conspicuous and qualitative change entails the splitting up (*fenjie*) or destruction (*pohuai*) of unity.

A number of points are worth noting in these moves. First, the metaphysical outlook has now been taken up into the argument, in terms of quantitative and incremental change. But the metaphysicians (or Lenin’s Mensheviks and wayward Bolsheviks) are now swept up into the dialectic of revolution, for their approach is characteristic of the status quo, which is in relative rest. This leads to the second point, which concerns the dialectical connections between the two types of motion. In doing so, Mao offers his own approach to the standard Marxist (and indeed Hegelian) argument concerning the dialectical relations between quantity and quality: ‘When the thing is in the second state of motion, the quantitative change of the first state has already reached a culminating point [*zuigaodian*] and gives rise to the dissolution of the thing as an entity and thereupon a qualitative change ensues, hence the appearance of a conspicuous change’.<sup>76</sup>

Third, what does he now mean by absolute change? Thus far, we have seen that it is conspicuous and quantitative, but it also destroys unity. What unity? The unity of the current situation, the given coordinates of a state of affairs, precisely those that provided the conditions – at rest – for relative and quantitative change. In other

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76 Mao 1937a, p. 342.

words, revolutionary change is final and complete.<sup>77</sup> As Mao writes: 'Things are constantly transforming themselves from the first into the second state of motion; the struggle of opposites goes on in both states but the contradiction is resolved through the second state'.<sup>78</sup> After a socialist revolution, there is no turning back, for the prior conditions of unity and rest have been permanently ruptured. Indeed, the contradictions in such a situation have actually been 'resolved' after the revolution. The 'contradiction's resolution [*maodun de jie jue*]' means to settle, to dispose and to finish off. This is not to say that contradictions will not be found under socialism; in fact, one should expect so, even that they may be exacerbated. But they will be new and hitherto unexperienced contradictions, as Mao and the other communists found out.<sup>79</sup> But this does not entail a transformation into the opposite term of a previous contradiction, for the conditions necessary for the unity of that contradiction have now disappeared. By now, the meaning of 'absolute' should be clear, for it indicates what is unconditional, final and complete.

### Conclusion

I have argued that Mao focused on Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* due to the revolutionary epistemology found therein. Lenin's rediscovery of Hegel entailed the crucial role of abstraction as the path to a deeper concreteness and the role of subjective intervention to change a world within which the subject is inescapably and creatively engaged. Mao took up this insight, but developed it much further. The first involved his rereading of the distinction between metaphysics and materialist dialectics, which not only provided him with the Marxist philosophical framework for the sinification of Marxism, but also indicated how the dogmatists become those who cannot see the role of creative intervention within given conditions. The second was even more substantial, precisely through an exegesis of Lenin, on the relative identity of contradictions and absolute struggle. Relative identity becomes quantitative change focused on unity, while absolute change becomes conspicuous, qualitative, disruptive and final. Crucially, through their dialectical interrelations, absolute change shifts from being eternal to final and complete.

The immediate significance for Mao was an ability to make sense

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<sup>77</sup> As Holubnychy (1964, 34-35) already noted in a perceptive article some time ago.

<sup>78</sup> Mao 1937a, p. 342.

<sup>79</sup> Mao 1957a, 1957b.

of the perpetual twists and turns of the revolutionary path up to 1937, as the many specific historical analyses in 'On Contradiction' make all too clear. In particular, there was a pressing need to understand the new united front with the Guomindang against the Japanese – not long after the two had been the bitterest of enemies.<sup>80</sup> On a longer view, the insights developed in Yan'an would become the framework for the deft moves – military and political – that paved the way to 1949, against the 'dogmatists', whose vision was smaller. As 1949 drew closer and as victory over the Guomindang became a certainty, Mao steadfastly refused suggestions from Stalin to broker a deal with his opponents. This revolutionary change would indeed be irreversible. Further, unlike Lenin, Mao lived to lead the efforts to construct socialism after 1949, but he also continued to study philosophy from time to time and deploy the insights he had developed in Yan'an. This applied as much to international relations, whether with the United States or the Soviet Union, as with internal matters. It may be that an absolute resolution to a contradiction was possible through a revolutionary moment, but this did not mean that contradictions disappeared under socialism in power. A whole new and unexpected batch would arise, some antagonistic and others not so – which is already foreshadowed at the close of 'On Contradiction'.

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<sup>80</sup> Liu 1971.

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