

On the Philosophical Basis of Proletarian Internationalism

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By Bob Avakian

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In [RW #1263](#) (December 26, 2004), Chairman Avakian referred to an article that appeared some time ago in the paper, commenting that it "argued that, in fact, in the era of imperialism in particular, the international arena, and changes and developments on that level, are more decisive and determining of what happens in particular countries than the 'internal conditions' in the particular countries, taken by themselves. This is an extremely important—and extremely controversial—point." The following is that article, which was excerpted from a letter written by Chairman Avakian in response to a letter he received, and published in Revolutionary Worker No. 96 (March 13, 1981).

What is the correct way to understand the principle that "the fundamental cause of the development of a thing is not external but internal," as Mao says in "On Contradiction"? (I. The Two World Outlooks.) Mao immediately indicates the answer in the concluding part of the same sentence (from which the above is taken): "...in the contradictoriness within the thing." This means (among other things) that, first of all, the thing is *able* to change (and is in fact constantly changing) because it constitutes (it is) a contradiction, "hence its motion and development"; that, further, it changes in certain ways and not others because of its internal contradiction (the particularity of it—for example Mao points out that an egg, given the appropriate external condition, temperature in this case, can turn into a chicken but a stone cannot); and that external factors, while they may be the specific "stimulus" that induces change, do not establish either the ability of the thing to change (or, to put it better, its continual change and its "changingness") or the character of such change—that, as Mao puts it, "external causes are the condition of change and internal causes are the basis of change, and that external causes become operative through internal causes." Thus, internal causes are in fact principal over external.

As applied to China, this means that, first of all and fundamentally, changes within China (and the possibility of revolution in particular) were (are) owing to the internal contradiction in China, and that *the way* in which that change came (comes) about (that is, the *character* of the revolution) is also determined by that internal contradiction. If there were no internal contradiction in China there could be (and would be) no change, no possibility of revolution; if the particularity of the internal contradiction were different, the character of the revolution would be different.

In developing this fundamental point, in "On Contradiction" and elsewhere, Mao struck a real blow against metaphysical thinking and tendencies, which view the basic (or even the only) cause of things as external; and the application of this principle in China was

crucial in the fight against dogmatism (and what we have come to call "dogmato-revisionism"). But, to a certain extent, there was the tendency to conceive and apply this principle itself metaphysically, which was linked to a certain amount of nationalism in the Chinese party, including among the genuine Marxist- Leninists, even Mao. In fact, this tendency was in opposition to another principle stressed in "On Contradiction": that "Because the range of things is vast and there is no limit to their development, what is universal in one context becomes particular in another," and vice versa. This means that what is internal in one context becomes external in another, and vice versa. China, for example (or the U.S., or any other country) has its own particularity, its own particular contradiction; and in one context, the rest of the world (and struggle and change in it) is external (to China, or the U.S., etc.). But it is also true that, in another context, China, the U.S. and the rest of the countries in the world form parts of the world (of human society) as a whole, with its internal contradiction and change, determined in an overall way by the fundamental contradiction of the bourgeois epoch, between socialized production/private appropriation.

This means that in an overall sense the development of the class (and national) struggle, the development of revolutionary situations, etc., in particular countries are more determined by developments in the world as a whole than by developments in the particular countries—determined not only as a condition of change (external cause) but as a basis of change (internal cause). In my opinion, this was not so before the advent of imperialism—or before bourgeois society (and to put it that way, the bourgeois epoch) became dominant (qualitatively) in the world, and changes in societies throughout the world became integrated in an overall way into a whole (single) process. (It might be raised: extending the principle that what is universal in one context becomes particular in another, and vice versa, couldn't it be said that each country in the world, and changes within it, have always been part of the world and world relations—and changes in them—or even that going further, the world is after all part of the solar system, the solar system part of a galaxy, etc. But it can—and must—be said that the difference between the solar system and the world, for example, is of a *qualitatively* different type than the difference between one country and the world, *in the context we are considering things* — which is precisely the context *of changes in human society*; and the same for the relationship between different—more or less isolated—societies in the period before the dominance of the bourgeois epoch and then in the period of that dominance, because before, changes in particular societies were not part of a whole—single—world process in the way they are now.)

All this does not mean that internal contradiction in a particular country is not after all the basis of change there, as discussed earlier. But it means that this is *relative*. To deepen this, let's look again at the question of the internal contradiction of a particular country determining the particular character of the revolution there. This is relatively true—and true in one context—but not absolutely so. For example, is it impossible to conceive of circumstances where the revolution in a semi-colonial, semi-feudal country could be a direct, one-stage struggle for socialism (more or less—this, too, is relative, not absolute)? What if the great part of the world were already socialist, or major, strategic parts of it

were, and/or proletarian revolutions were winning victory in strategic parts of the world at that same time? (Actually, Engels raised a possibility of this kind, in an essay I can't seem to find now, where he pointed out that if the world situation were somewhat favorable, and if experience in advancing to socialism had already been acquired, it might be possible to build—more or less go directly to—socialism even in a backward society. This, by the way, lends weight to a criticism of the '79 Central Committee Report where, in the last part of "Outline & Summary," it is said that "for socialism to be built, the productive forces must be developed enough that there exists in the country at least some large-scale means of production and a modern proletariat working in a socialized way on this basis.... Further, how rapidly the ownership of the means of production can be socialized, and what intermediate and lower stages (besides state ownership) this must pass through, will be fundamentally determined by the level of development of the productive forces...." These statements are not entirely untrue, but they do tend to make an absolute out of a relative truth, they do tend to be mechanical and could encourage nationalist tendencies.)

It is with this viewpoint that we must grasp that, despite the fact that Mao's contributions, especially the theory and line of continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat, are truly immortal, and that the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was the highest pinnacle yet reached by the international proletariat, still these things were treated a little bit as "things unto themselves," too much apart from the whole, worldwide struggle against imperialism, reaction and all exploiting classes. The comrade, in his letter, mentions studying over material from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution with this question in mind, in particular the 9th Congress Report of the Chinese Communist Party. In that Report a truly internationalist stand is—in the main and overwhelmingly—reflected. Specifically in the context of speaking of the great victory of the Cultural Revolution, the Report quotes Mao saying that "According to the Leninist viewpoint, the final victory of a socialist country not only requires the efforts of the proletariat and the broad masses of the people at home, but also involves the victory of the world revolution and the abolition of the system of exploitation of man by man over the whole globe, upon which all mankind will be emancipated. Therefore, it is wrong to speak lightly of the final victory of the revolution in our country; it runs counter to Leninism and does not conform to facts." Again, this—on the whole, even overwhelmingly—is a very good, a genuinely internationalist, stand; but within it are indicated certain errors that run counter to this as well.

It is not only, or mainly, "the final victory of a socialist country" that requires the victory of the world revolution, etc. It is the abolition of exploitation, of classes, and the emancipation of mankind (from class society) itself that requires this and must be put "front and center." I don't believe this is just being "picky" but actually involves an important problem we have been focusing on: the mistaken tendency to see internationalism as something "extended" from the proletariat (or people) of one country to others. I think the emphasis in what Mao says above should be changed, even reversed in one sense, in the following way: It should have been stressed to the proletariat and masses in China that, while socialism could and must be built in China (in

the basic sense of establishing a socialist economic base) and the dictatorship of the proletariat must be defended and strengthened (along with carrying out further transformations in the superstructure overall as well as the economic base) by continuing the revolution, still this was only a subordinate part of the world proletarian revolution, for which the masses of China as well as every other country must devote their efforts and struggle first and above all; and that (as a secondary, subordinate but not unimportant point) not only did the "*final victory* of a socialist country" require the victory of the world proletarian revolution, but that *in the long run* (no one can put an exact time frame on this) socialism in particular countries was bound to be reversed unless further advances were made in the world proletarian revolution. Or, as it has been put, socialism in one country is quite correct, and necessary, as a *tactical* orientation (especially in the face of the opposition not only of the bourgeoisie in direct form but of Trotskyites and others) but *not* as a *long-term strategic orientation*. This, I think, has important bearing on the question of what the Chinese revolutionaries could have done differently...

A question of great importance, especially in relation to the discussion of internal/external: in summing up why the movement of the '60s (in the U.S.) did not "go all the way" we have mentioned the ability of the ruling class to make concessions at home and, increasingly of late, along with that the fact that they had "enough freedom to cut their losses (in Indochina) and get out of the war before graver developments took place for them internationally" (RW No. 83, p. 12). *Both* of these things have essentially to do with the *international* situation, and both—that is, the turning of both into their opposite—will be of increasing importance in the period ahead; but I think that the second element will be of greater significance, not only if world war does break out, but even in the developments before that might occur. Here, in other words, the question—and importance—of their being "stretched to the limit" and our ability to lead the masses to seize this opportunity; and here too another concrete demonstration of the *fundamental importance* and the need for the correct understanding of proletarian internationalism, of the international struggle and revolution, as the foundation and starting point for the workers and their vanguard in all countries.