

Politics and War in the thought of Mao Tse-tung

War politics, politics war—each ‘continues’ the other: ‘After several decades, the victory of the Chinese people’s democratic revolution, viewed in retrospect, will seem like only a brief prologue to a long drama.’¹

Every strategy, even a generalized one, is a limited instrument. He who sets this limit distinguishes a time of war from a time of peace and masters their inter-connection, the two-way traffic relating one to the other. Strategy is a particular but exemplary case of the theory of struggle, of ‘contradiction’, in which Mao Tse-tung thinks the entire life of society.

Thermonuclear weapons have proved ‘non-decisive’ in the framework of classical strategy. This could indicate either the subordinate character of the use of the atomic threat, or the end of classical strategy. To exclude this second

alternative it is necessary to show that the 'ultimate' weapon is not the foundation for a political decision that might simply be substituted for the strategic decision.

1. The 'Laws' of Decision

War is thought with the aid of a particular instrument: a matrix in which 'objective' factors only intervene as a function of the 'reciprocal action' of the opponents, the intersection of their strategies. Mathematicians note that this model is valid not only for armed conflict; they extend it for example to the economy, especially to conflict between monopolies.² Thus we find a principle of intelligibility that is valid for every relation of forces in general. Forces cannot be defined in isolation; each is not in itself a (physical or statistical) quantity, and cannot be considered separately at first and added to the others later (non-additivity). To analyse forces is always to relate them together.

Consideration of the relation logically precedes every inquiry bearing on observable reality, because the former organizes the latter. For reasons of method, when he proceeds to an 'analysis of the classes in Chinese society',³ Mao Tse-tung starts with the question 'Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?': the *inter-relation* of forces governs every analysis of concrete forces. This method opposes 'external' causality and 'internal' causality: 'The fundamental cause of the development of a thing is not external but internal; it lies in the contradictoriness within the thing . . . Social development is due chiefly not to external but to internal causes'.⁴ Strategy offers an example of such a pre-eminence of the relation over the forces it connects together: the various factors producing strength and weakness only act within the 'contradiction' between the opponents. 'In war, offence and defence, advance and retreat, victory and defeat are all mutually contradictory phenomena. One cannot exist without the other. The two aspects are at once in conflict and in interdependence, and this constitutes the totality of a war, pushes its development forward and solves its problems'.⁵

This approach is valid generally: it characterizes a 'world outlook'. The action of external forces is a function of the 'internal' conflict in which they intervene. Mao Tse-tung's originality lies in the conclusions he is able to draw from this affirmation. If forces only exist in a relation, they

¹ *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (English translation from the First and Second Chinese Editions, Peking, 1961 & 1965), Vol. IV, p. 374 (1949).

² Cf. Oskar Morgenstern: 'On the Application of Game Theory to Economics', *Recent Advances in Game Theory*, Princeton, 1962: 'There can be no doubt that game situations even of the most obvious nature abound in business. The fundamental criterion is, of course, whether there are important cases where the outcome of a firm's transactions and decisions does not depend on its own actions alone, but—besides chance—also on those of other firms in a manner which does not permit treating them statistically' (p. 3). More generally, Morgenstern remarks that it is thereby possible to leave behind the hypothesis of a market based on free individual competition, the starting-point of classical political economy (p. 8).

³ *Selected Works*, Vol. I (1926).

⁴ 'On Contradiction', *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 313.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

may be present there virtually. Strategy bases the superiority of defence on the relation of forces, and the latter cannot be observed since they have to be 'awakened', organized. Observation only verifies strategy *post festum*, when the latter is successful. 'In history, such absolute superiority rarely appears in the early stages of a war or a campaign but is to be found towards its end'.⁶ Thus strategy must be true before it has been verified, like all theory: 'Generally speaking, those (ideas) that succeed are correct and those that fail are incorrect, and this is especially true of man's struggle with nature. In social struggle, the forces representing the advanced class sometimes suffer defeat not because their ideas are incorrect, but because, in the balance of forces engaged in struggle, they are not as powerful for the time being as the forces of reaction'.⁷ The same is true of ideas and theories, whose truth is 'specific' and cannot be confirmed or invalidated by immediate observation: 'Throughout history, new and correct things have often failed at the outset to win recognition from the majority of people and have had to develop by twists and turns in struggle. Often correct and good things have first been regarded not as fragrant flowers but as poisonous weeds. Copernicus' theory of the solar system and Darwin's theory of evolution were once dismissed as erroneous and had to win through over bitter opposition'.⁸

The internal/external distinction extends the type of intelligibility first encountered in strategy to every form of thought. Forces only exist within a relation, which must be reflected in themselves. The forces may as yet be no more than virtual: the truth of a theory does not depend on observation pure and simple, but organizes the latter, delimiting its scope and validity. The connection between 'theory' and 'praxis' is not conceived as an exchange between ideas and facts—for observable facts are prior constructs, and this construction has a 'specific', 'internal' truth. As opposed to the 'realism' of vulgar Marxism, Mao Tse-tung's thought, like all theory, claims to be true before it has been realized, and to be realizable because it is true.

Upon this basis, 'On Contradiction' determines the general form of the relation of forces, and then deduces from it different 'specific' types as so many different structures of decision.

2. The Universality of Contradiction

The battle, which is decisive for the two opponents, gives strategy the standard that enables it to measure the objective value of either's calculations. In the more general context of a theory of struggle, the reduction of every difference to a contradiction achieves the same focus on decision: 'Each and every difference already contains a contradiction and that difference itself is contradiction.'

⁶ 'On Protracted War', *Selected Works*, Vol. II, p. 162.

⁷ 'Where do Correct Ideas Come from?' *Selecteed Readings from the Works of Mao Tse-tung* (English translation of the Second Chinese Edition, Peking, 1967), pp. 405–406.

⁸ 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People', *Selected Readings*, p. 374.

Behind Lenin, we should see Hegel again in the plan ‘which shows how the concept forms in and out of itself that reality which has vanished in it’.⁹ Conceiving a force as decisive prevents it from being grasped in an isolated definition (or ‘determinateness’); its determination ‘is not a determinateness which is, and rests, and is related to another in such a manner that the related term and its relation are different from one another’.¹⁰ Not only can a force not be divorced from the relation which connects it to another force, but this relation itself is not superimposed on the two forces, it is not ‘the indifference of difference’.¹¹ A relation is only decisive if the terms it connects together are defined within this relation, which means ‘that to be opposed is not simply a moment, nor belongs to comparison, but is the peculiar determination of the sides of opposition. So that they are not positive or negative in themselves apart from the relation to the other, but this relation (being exclusive) constitutes their determination’.¹² To theorize the decision presupposes that we can discern behind the differences what it is that regulates their action, their equilibrium and their transformations, the location which decides (=contradiction) and in which all is decided (=internal contradiction).

The loan from Hegel is quite precise, and is the basis for extending the type of thought we have already perceived in strategy. The internal/external distinction excludes the possibility of anything above the decision—the decision decides for itself; the difference/contradiction distinction excludes the possibility of anything below the decision—the decision decides for everything.¹³ Contradiction is the *heart* of the problem: ‘What is a problem? A problem is the contradiction in a thing. Where one has an unresolved contradiction, there one has a problem. Since there is a problem, you have to be for one side and against the other, and you have to pose the problem.’¹⁴

The work of thought, which governs all observation, is performed in the relating together; it ‘poses’ the problem. Thought has no other object: ‘there is nothing that does not contain contradiction; without contradiction nothing would exist’.¹⁵ Revolutionary activity is the rigorous application of this contradiction, starting with its ‘correct’ formulation: ‘Proper limits have to be exceeded in order to right a wrong, or else the wrong cannot be righted’.¹⁶ War, like political or cultural revolution, is defined and tempered in this ‘crucible’.

⁹ G. W. F. Hegel: *Science of Logic* (English translation by W. H. Johnston and L. G. Struthers, London, 1929), Vol. II, p. 226 (‘Subjective Logic’, ‘On the Concept in General’)—translating *Begriff* as ‘concept’, not as ‘Notion’—Translator’s note.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 34 (‘Objective Logic’, Book II, Section I, Ch. I, C(c)).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 45 (‘Objective Logic’, Book II, Section I, Ch. II, B(b)).

¹² *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 54 (‘Objective Logic’, Book II, Section I, Ch. II, B(c)).

¹³ ‘Thinking reason, on the other hand, sharpens (so to speak) the blunt difference of variety, the mere manifold of imagination, into essential difference, that is, opposition. The manifold entities acquire activity and liveliness in relation to one another only when driven on the sharp point of contradiction’, *ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 69 (‘Objective Logic’, Book II, Section I, Ch. II, C).

¹⁴ ‘Oppose Stereotyped Party Writing’, *Selected Works*, Vol. III, p. 61.

¹⁵ ‘On Contradiction’, *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 316.

¹⁶ ‘Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan’, *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 29.

To conceive political activity as a whole presupposes the same intellectual operation as that which developed the whole of strategy from the offensive/defensive contradiction: the analysis of the 'movement of opposites from beginning to end in the process of development of every single thing.'¹⁷ As the universality of contradiction enables Mao Tse-tung to regard all 'praxis' as struggle, the general relation of 'theory' to 'praxis' is analogous to the general relation of strategy to war. Theory can construct its concept of contradiction, the universal form of struggle, just as the concept of war was constructed; its intelligibility is completely internal and derives from two axioms.

3. The Intensification of Contradiction

A decisive struggle makes short work: it brings the forces into a state of 'acute' opposition. This process of 'intensification',¹⁸ analogous to the ascent to extremes, refers to a first type of intelligibility of contradiction, to the 'first meaning'¹⁹ intended in the affirmation of the 'identity of opposites' in a contradiction.

The terms of a contradiction 'coexist' even within their opposition; as the contradiction is 'internal', their opposition is an 'absolute relation' (Hegel) which defines them absolutely, 'without life, there would be no death; without death, there would be no life; . . . without the bourgeoisie there would be no proletariat; without the proletariat there would be no bourgeoisie.'²⁰ Contradiction is the logical translation of the 'struggle to the death'; whether it exercises its ascendancy over the relation between two armies, two classes or two ideas, the terms confronting one another in the relation have no existence outside the confrontation itself: 'each is the condition for the other's existence'.²¹

Thus Mao Tse-tung, following Clausewitz, Hegel and the theoreticians of the 'zero-sum game', enunciates the first theoretical condition necessary to think a contradiction as 'internal', as a closed relation referring to itself alone.

The matrix of every decision, contradiction presents itself as a dual system of 'places' (principal/secondary). Those have strictly opposed values and mark the relative positions of each of the terms in opposition (or 'aspects'), at every moment in the ascent to extremes (or in the accentuation of a contradiction). 'Of the two contradictory aspects, one must be principal and the other secondary. The principal aspect is the one playing the leading role in the contradiction. The nature of a thing is determined mainly by the principal aspect of a contradiction, the aspect which has gained the dominant position'.²² Thus Marxists designate the ruling class at a given epoch as the 'principal aspect' of the class-struggle contradiction. The principal/secondary distinction (strategically: victory/defeat) is the result of the synchronic section that

¹⁷ 'On Contradiction', *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 318.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 324–326.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 337–338.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 333.

can be made at any moment in the struggle; it establishes the qualities—one the inverse of the other—of the power of decision ('domination') of which each camp ('aspect') disposes.²³ Contradiction is a system of decision: to ascend to extremes, in any domain whatsoever, is a struggle to occupy the principal place (Mao: a struggle for power).

This condition is as universal as contradiction. The ascent to extremes defines the combatants in war as in knowledge. 'Marxists should not be afraid of criticism from any quarter. Quite the contrary, they need to temper and develop themselves and win new positions in the teeth of criticism and in the storm and stress of struggle . . . Plants raised in hot-houses are unlikely to be sturdy'.²⁴

Strategically, the ascent to extremes made a 'weapon' of everything which could yield an advantage in it. Politically and culturally, the intensification of a contradiction defines the style of action, or even of writing: 'This is the militant style proper to us, the revolutionary proletariat. Since we want to teach the people to know the truth and arouse them to fight for their own emancipation, we need this militant style. A blunt knife draws no blood'.²⁵ Sharpened contradiction and revolutionary radicalism are synonymous, Mao Tse-tung argues of 'aristocratic', 'decadent', 'creative moods': 'So far as proletarian writers and artists are concerned, should not these kinds of creative moods be destroyed? I think they should; they should be utterly destroyed. And while they are being destroyed, something new can be constructed'.²⁶

The mutual definition of the terms within a contradiction excludes the possibility of any non-contradictory universality: 'As for the so-called love of humanity, there has been no such all-inclusive love since humanity was divided into classes'; the 'people' are not determined with reference to an external human nature, but in their military, political and cultural relation to the 'enemy of the people'.²⁷ Just as the possibility of the ascent to extremes sat in judgment over every military compromise and broke up every one that was compromising, so the sharpened contradiction serves as a criterion for ideological radicalism: 'We Chinese Communists . . . never balk at any personal sacrifice and are ready at all times to give our lives for the cause; can we be reluctant to discard any idea, view point, opinion or method which is not suited to the needs of the people?'.²⁸

The exclusive co-existence of opposites—the first 'meaning' of contradiction—governs the radicalism and the style of the questions posed: 'Communists must always go into the whys and wherefores of anything . . . on no account should they follow blindly and encourage

²³ The qualitative principal/secondary distinction corresponds to the strictly opposed and correlative values qualitatively taken by the 'interests' (utilities) of the opponents in a zero-sum game.

²⁴ 'On the Correct Handling. . .', *Selected Readings*, p. 376.

²⁵ 'A Talk to the Editorial Staff of the *Shansi-Suiyuan Daily*', *Selected Works*, Vol. IV, p. 245.

²⁶ 'Talks at the Yen'an Forum on Literature and Art', *Selected Works*, Vol. III, p. 94.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ 'On Coalition Government', *Selected Works*, Vol. III, p. 317.

slavishness'.²⁹ However, so far, we have only seen the first dimension of Mao Tse-tung's 'dialectics'. The handling of the question introduces a second.

4. The Asymmetry of the 'Aspects' of a Contradiction

The 'people', the subject of strategy, politics and culture, are not only defined by the intensification of contradiction, but also in it. Two camps, opposed in the ascent to extremes, occupy strategically asymmetrical positions: the power of the people is revealed by the privilege of defence. This asymmetry, in the framework of a theory of struggle, is the asymmetry of the 'aspects' of a contradiction, of their 'unevenness'.

A first examination of contradiction has revealed the co-existence of the opposites in their struggle to the death. A second, 'more important', examination deciphers the mechanisms of 'conversion' between the terms of the relation. 'In given conditions, each of the contradictory aspects within a thing transforms itself into its opposite, changes its position to that of its opposite.' For example, 'by means of revolution the proletariat, at one time ruled, is transformed into the ruler, while the bourgeoisie, the erstwhile ruler, is transformed into the ruled and changes its position to that originally occupied by its opposite'.³⁰ Here Mao Tse-tung is no longer considering the simple mutual exclusion of the terms of a contradiction, but the relations of domination that crystallize in it, by which one 'aspect' gains the upper hand over its opposite or vice versa, until the final victory of the one annihilates the other and causes the contradiction to disappear.

The 'aspect' designates the organization of the opposing terms within the contradiction, considered no longer as a system of competitive places (principal/secondary) but as a system of conversion. Since it governs the movement of a struggle from one end to the other, its two poles ('aspects') must be dominant and dominated in turn, changing places with one another. The 'conversion' of the aspects accounts for the decision process: 'The principal and the non-principal aspects of a contradiction transform themselves into each other and the nature of the thing changes accordingly.'³¹

The secret that permits government of 'the act of war' as a whole, the asymmetry of the two basic 'aspects', the offensive and the defensive, is a particular case of the 'unevenness' of the aspects of a contradiction: 'In any contradiction the development of the contradictory aspects is uneven.'³² The symmetry of competition governs the reciprocal positions of the aspects at each moment of the struggle (principal/secondary); the asymmetry of conversion *only appears* at the end of a 'series of struggles with many twists and turns', in the final victory. The art of

²⁹ 'Rectify the Party's Style of Work', *Selected Works*, Vol. III, pp. 49–50. We should recognize here the style that is the pride of the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution': 'The 700 million Chinese are all critics', *Renmin Ribao*, June 8th, 1966.

³⁰ 'On Contradiction', *Selected Works*, Vol. I, pp. 338–339.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 333.

handling the conversion process is designated in the 'methods for resolving contradictions';³³ they must organize the entire development of the contradiction to the profit of one 'aspect'. Only at the 'last moment' will this aspect become definitively the 'principal' one. In other words, the correctness of these methods cannot be observed in the results at each stage, like the 'strategies' of games theory, they have an internal, 'specific', intelligibility; the mere observation of the gains and losses at one moment of the game does not explain it, still less is it a criterion of it.

Here we may discern the solution Mao Tse-tung proposes as his answer to a classical difficulty of Marxism, which distinguishes between class in its current, empirical reality and the 'class position' defined by theory (Marx: class 'in itself'/class 'for itself'; Lenin: class/vanguard party). The peasant army is still 'led by the proletariat', not because its leaders have proletarian origins, life-styles or opinions, but because it occupies the 'proletarian position' in the class struggle; that is, the proletarian 'aspect' or camp as it is defined in and by the strategy of the decisive struggle in China.

But the analogy is not complete; what classical Marxism calls 'the class position' does not correspond to one aspect, but to three. For in the class struggle Mao Tse-tung distinguishes three 'fronts'. The proletariat is defined within three contradictions, each with its own characteristic logic—its type of 'conversion'. The economic aspect, the political and military aspect, the cultural aspect: each of these is treated as a 'form of motion'³⁴ with original and irreducible properties. The 'specific' connection between the two contradictory aspects determines the reciprocal action of these two aspects, including the form taken by their asymmetry, or the 'unevenness' of their development: 'When we speak of understanding each aspect of a contradiction, we mean understanding what specific position each aspect occupies, what concrete forms it assumes in its interdependence and in its contradiction with its opposite, and what concrete methods are employed in the struggle with its opposite.'³⁵ The cultural struggle has its 'concrete'—i.e. 'specific'—methods, methods which differ not only in fact, but also in principle, from politico-military strategies.

The asymmetry that determines the method of combat and the victory of one of the aspects is also 'internal'. The unevenness of the two aspects creates internally the temporality characteristic of the contradiction, the time necessary to obtain the final decision.

There are as many typically uneven relations between aspects, forms of struggle, autonomous structures of decision, and definitions of the 'people' and the 'proletariat' as there are 'specific contradictions'.

5. The Three Structures of Contradiction

'Where do correct ideas come from?' asks Mao Tse-tung. He begins

³³ Ibid., pp. 322, 323 and 346.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 319.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 323.

his answer like every Marxist: 'Do they drop from the skies? No. Are they innate in the mind? No. They come from social practice, and from it alone'. But he goes on, and in this lies his originality: 'they come from three kinds of social practice, the struggle for production, the class struggle and scientific experiment'.³⁶

It is a double originality. On the one hand Mao Tse-tung regards all praxis as a struggle in the strict sense, i.e. a matrix of decision governable by a theory (=strategy of the 'method for resolving a contradiction'). On the other hand, he numbers three praxes, each of which possesses its specific form and characteristic intelligibility.

The world is divided into three basic 'practices'.³⁷ Like game theory, Mao Tse-tung differentiates in the first place between 'relations between man and nature' (the economic practice) and 'certain relations that exist between man and man'.³⁸ In the second place, the relations between man and man are distinguished according to whether they are decided by 'coercion' or by 'persuasion' (the practice of more or less material violence/cultural or ideological practice): 'Two different methods, one dictatorial and the other democratic, should be used to resolve the two different kinds of contradictions—those between ourselves and the enemy and those among the people.'³⁹ So three forms of alterity correspond to the three practices (man/nature, people/enemy, people/people).

This division is not a material one: The three practices do not have distinct and independent real objects. Politics intervenes in the economy. Thought, the object of the third practice, cannot be isolated from the second, for it is always 'stamped with the brand of a class'.⁴⁰ If the three practices are concurrent and act on one another in reality, they are perfectly distinct in their 'specific forms', as each is an original and autonomous matrix of decision. 'Qualitatively different contradictions can only be resolved by qualitatively different methods. For instance, the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is resolved by the method of socialist revolution . . . contradiction within the Communist Party is resolved by the method of criticism and self-criticism; the contradiction between society and nature is resolved by the method of developing the productive forces. . . . The principle of using different methods to resolve different contradictions is one which Marxist-Leninists must strictly observe.'⁴¹

Each of these basic matrices can be constructed according to the model of the strategic structure. It is specified: 1. by the target (*Ziel*) aimed at by the decision; 2. by the form of struggle which enables the target to be attained. The targets define the extremes in the economic alterna-

³⁶ 'Where do Correct Ideas Come from?', *Selected Readings*, p. 405.

³⁷ In general, economy, political struggle and culture. He has various formulations: war—production—culture ('The United Front in Cultural Work', *Selected Works*, Vol. III, p. 235), etc.

³⁸ 'On Practice', *Selected Works*, Vol. I, pp. 295, 296 and Vol. III, p. 39.

³⁹ 'On the Correct Handling. . .', *Selected Readings*, p. 357.

⁴⁰ 'On Practice', *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 296.

⁴¹ 'On Contradiction', *Selected Works*, Vol. I, pp. 321–322.

tive (development/non-development of the productive forces), in the political alternative (ruling/ruled), and in the cultural alternative (true/false). The forms of struggle are distinguished by the methods they bring to bear, coercion or persuasion (self-education, criticism and self-criticism). 'We think that it is harmful to the growth of art and science if administrative measures are used to impose one particular style of art or school of thought and to ban another. Questions of right and wrong in the arts and sciences should be settled through free discussion in artistic and scientific circles and through practical work in these fields. They should not be settled in summary fashion.'⁴²

The form of each matrix reveals a 'method of resolution', a theory of decision based on a particular asymmetry. In each of them, if the 'people' apply the adequate method, they will be able to become the 'principal aspect' definitively. In violent struggle, which makes use of coercion, the people are the subject of the defensive strategy of a 'protracted war'. Economically, Mao Tse-tung never makes technology the prime motor of development. The productive forces are 'the productive forces of the Chinese people';⁴³ when he invokes the history of China, his 'materialism' leads him to explain the changes in society by the transformations of the economic base, but these latter refer in turn to the people's practice, to 'the peasant uprisings and peasant wars (which constituted the real motive force of historical development'.⁴⁴ Here we find one of the motifs of the Great Leap Forward which aimed to awaken the 'productive forces' of the peasant masses: it is also the root-cause of a constant rejection of 'economism'.⁴⁵

In cultural practice, the people are seen for a third time as the 'aspect' which must be decisive. 'The life of the people . . . make(s) all literature and art seem pallid by comparison; (it) provide(s) literature and art with an inexhaustible source, their only source . . . In fact, the literary and artistic works of the past are not a source but a stream'.⁴⁶ This primacy is only asserted within the specific form of cultural activity, in a struggle (true/false, old/new, ignorance/knowledge) which Mao Tse-tung foresees as much more 'protracted' than the war of the same name. The reference to the people does not mean an appeal to the majority—which may be wrong,⁴⁷ but refers to the task of establishing a 'common language'.⁴⁸ In this form of activity, the principal and the secondary aspect, the educator and the educated, constantly change their positions, the artist returns to his source, 'popularizes' himself and raises the

⁴² 'On the Correct Handling . . .', *Selected Readings*, p. 374. On the 'specific' character of cultural practice cf. 'Talks at the Yen-an Forum . . .': 'Works of art which lack artistic quality have no force, however progressive they are politically', *Selected Works*, Vol. III, p. 90.

⁴³ 'On Coalition Government', *Selected Works*, Vol. III, p. 303.

⁴⁴ 'The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party': 'The class struggles of the peasants, the peasant uprisings and peasant wars constituted the real motive force of historical development in Chinese feudal society. For each of the major peasant uprisings and wars dealt a blow to the feudal regime of the time, and hence more or less furthered the growth of the social productive forces,' *Selected Works*, Vol. II, p. 308.

⁴⁵ *Peking Review*, January 30th, 1967.

⁴⁶ 'Talks at the Yen-an Forum . . .', *Selected Works*, Vol. III, p. 81.

⁴⁷ 'On the Correct Handling . . .', *Selected Readings*, p. 375.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

level of the people.⁴⁹ If the ‘people’ finally find that they are the ‘principal aspect’, this can only be in a culture, a truth and a common language: ‘Although man’s social life is the only source of literature and art . . . the people are not satisfied with life alone and demand literature and art as well. Why? Because . . . life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be . . . more universal than actual everyday life.’⁵⁰ The same type of relation governs the connection ‘proletariat’—‘popular masses’.⁵¹

Productive force, protracted defence, cultural language: the ‘people’ are thrice inscribed in an autonomous matrix of decision, defining themselves in it as the decisive aspect in respect to the specific forms of resolution for each of the contradictions. The relation between these three definitions has still to be thought.

6. The Equivalence of the Decisions

Mao Tse-tung’s politics determines three targets, pursued with three sorts of means by a single subject, the ‘people’. But the unity of the three practices—‘politics’ as such—cannot be deduced directly from the unity of the actor: the people themselves are only defined within the structures of decision. ‘The concept of “the people” varies in content in different countries and in different periods of history in the same country.’⁵² Only the co-ordination of the three practices constitutes the political line: ‘policy is the starting-point of all the practical actions of a revolutionary party . . . A revolutionary party is carrying out a policy whenever it takes any action’.⁵³

How is a global decision governing three autonomous mechanisms of decision to be justified? The question is posed twice: 1. when, in a precise time and situation, it is necessary to find the crucial point, the ‘principal contradiction’, in the jumble of ideological, political and military problems; 2. when it is necessary to think the general, theoretical connection which gathers together the economy, politics and culture in the unity of Mao Tse-tung’s thought.

* * *

In a concrete situation, Mao Tse-tung proceeds with the aid of a new distinction: principal contradiction/secondary contradiction.

The three basic practices differ in form, but they do not act in three

⁴⁹ If popularization remains at the same level for ever, with the same stuff being supplied month after month and year after year, always the same “Little Cowherd” and the same “man, hand, mouth, knife, cow, goat”, will not the educators and those being educated be six of one and half a dozen of the other? What would be the sense of such popularization? The people demand popularization and, following that, higher standards; they demand higher standards month by month and year by year’, ‘Talks at the Yen-an Forum . . .’, *Selected Works*, Vol. III, p. 83.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁵¹ ‘On the Correct Handling. . .’, *Selected Readings*, p. 357.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁵³ ‘On the Policy concerning Industry and Commerce’, *Selected Works*, Vol. IV, p. 204.

distinct worlds. Their intersection gives rise to a multiplicity of problems in the same situation, and these problems are interdependent. He who would transform them must first order them: 'There are many contradictions in the course of development of any major thing.'⁵⁴ To discover the central problem that makes possible the government of this series is to pin-point 'the principal contradiction whose existence and development determines or influences the existence and development of the other contradictions'.⁵⁵

This registration of the theatre of operations must be constantly brought up to date. 'The contradictions change position'. Sometimes 'imperialism' is opposed to an entire colonial or semi-colonial country (national war), sometimes it allies itself to an indigenous class (civil war).⁵⁶ Mao Tse-tung associates the principal contradiction of the moment with the basic categories of Marxism (class society—class struggle—capitalism—imperialism—metropolitan/semi-colonial struggle—China's internal contradictions—KMT/CCP struggle).⁵⁷ But he never deduces the principal contradiction from these principles. It is 'investigation' of the terrain, observation of the battle-field that establishes the crucial point.

Observation is strategic in so far as it introduces a war plan. Mao Tse-tung is here playing very subtly on the difference between the principal contradiction (which establishes the decisive theatre of operations) and the principal aspect of the contradiction (which reveals the decisive method of action within that theatre). 'Look at China, for instance. Imperialism occupies the principal position in the contradiction in which China has been reduced to a semi-colony, it oppresses the Chinese people, and China has been changed from an independent country into a semi-colonial one. But this state of affairs will inevitably change; in the struggle between the two sides, the power of the Chinese people which is growing under the leadership of the proletariat will inevitably change China from a semi-colony into an independent country, whereas imperialism will be overthrown.'⁵⁸ The force that installs the principal contradiction ('imperialism', which intervenes in a certain way, according to the world situation) is this contradiction's principal aspect—at the time of its installation. But the contradiction has its own logic and this does not depend on the force that introduced it. The principal (dominant) aspect may become the secondary (dominated) aspect, while the principal contradiction remains the same. A strategy based on the form of action appropriate to this contradiction (in this case, protracted war) makes this 'conversion' inevitable. Observation fixes the location of decision (relation between the contradictions) but its

⁵⁴For instance, in the course of China's bourgeois-democratic revolution, where the conditions are exceedingly complex, there exist the contradiction between all the oppressed classes in Chinese society and imperialism, the contradiction between the great masses of the people and feudalism, the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the contradiction between the peasantry and the urban petty bourgeoisie on the one hand and the bourgeoisie on the other, the contradiction between the various reactionary ruling groups, and so on', 'On Contradiction', *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 322.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 331–332.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 334–335.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

form remains that of one of the three canonic practices (relation of the 'aspects').

Here again Mao Tse-tung is generalizing the Clausewitzian mode of thought. The cultural practice has a political significance: it is a 'continuation' of politics by other means, specific ones. Politics in turn has a cultural significance, and these two types of action intervene in economic activity. Each one is a continuation of the others with its own characteristic mode of action as go-between; in considering any particular historical situation it is necessary to start with the principal contradiction and then to search out the decisive practice. Its target will then subordinate to itself the others' targets which will become its 'instruments'; in a given situation, the relation between the three practices is analogous to the relation of ordered equivalence which interconnects *Ziel* and *Zweck* in strategic calculation.

The problem which focusses a political situation may derive from an 'external' force: it is then posed by the enemy (e.g. 'imperialism'). But its solution can only be internal, as a function of the process of decision characteristic of one of the three basic practices. Which one? The selection of the decisive form takes place twice, allowing two temporal divisions. The 'principal contradiction' determines an epoch and the form of action that governs it (imperialism—protracted war). The relation between the 'aspects' within the latter allows a smaller-scale periodization: the CCP can only conduct the protracted war if it knows how to establish the correct strategy. Thus at a given moment in the protracted war, ideological problems may be determinant. No pre-established order fixes these relations once and for all; in another stage or in a different situation, conflict may in its turn be no more than a (principal or secondary) aspect of the cultural contradiction, which has become the principal one.⁵⁹

Who decides the adequate strategy, who fixes the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of the contradiction? In other words, *where* does the ordering of the three practices take place, establishing the political line for a given epoch? Is it in the first, the second or the third practice? Is there one general relation between them which would alone make it possible to conceive their particular orderings, in the diversity of situations?

* * *

The economy, the use of force and culture each has its own characteristic intelligibility, Mao Tse-tung finds it expressed in Marxist political economy, revolutionary strategy and the methods for 'the correct handling of contradictions among the people'. These three types of rationality must co-operate to establish, in every situation, *the* correct line which carries with it the unitary decision. How is the relation between them settled?

⁵⁹'True, the productive forces, practice and the economic base generally play the principal and decisive roles; whoever denies this is not a materialist. But it must also be admitted that in certain conditions, such aspects as the relations of production, theory and the superstructure in turn manifest themselves in the principal and decisive role', *Ibid.*, p. 336.

The economic contradictions are situated theoretically by the universal/particular distinction. The 'universal' contradictions define the theatre of operations, for the economic categories describe the most constant givens, the framework of the action (class society, capitalism, imperialism). On the other side, the 'particular' contradictions articulate these categories around matrices of decision borrowed from the other two 'practices'. The universal discourse of political economy is never enough to explain particular decisive strategies: 'it is precisely in the particularity of contradiction that the universality of contradiction resides'.⁶⁰

No more do strategic categories by themselves explain the correctness of a decision; they are subordinate to the friend/enemy distinction of which they are not the origin.⁶¹

So it is in the third kind of practice that the concept appears which settles for each decision the relation between the three practices within the single decision. This might seem to be a truism: theory is born of theoretical practice.⁶² But this would be to forget that each practice uses specific forms; to say that theory is elaborated in the forms of persuasive discussion is to recognize that in every struggle, even the most violent or the most economic, the correct line is necessarily fixed by the action of criticism and self-criticism 'among' the people or the Party. Here we find the origin of the problem of the organization of the 'General Staff' of the Revolution and the particular meaning Mao seeks to give to 'democratic centralism', since he is not satisfied with the classical Marxist comparison of the 'Party' to an army or a central state planning ministry.

This primacy of the third practice in the establishment of a correct line definitively closes the whole decision process in politics, as far as Mao Tse-tung is concerned. Utilizing diverse means, among which economic activity, violence or persuasion are in the ascendant by turns according to the case, it is always 'among the people' that the decision will be taken. Its mechanisms are essentially 'internal'.

7. Paper Tiger

The definition of Mao Tse-tung's politics is governed entirely by the

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 316. The opposition basic/specific often interferes with the opposition universal/particular. The two French versions (Ed. de Peking, Ed. Sociales) translate the same phrase indifferently by one or the other of these oppositions (the English translations from Peking only use universal/particular—Translator's note).

⁶¹ 'The protracted war was led by the "people" and in its name. At the beginning of the war, and during it, strategy imposed its criteria and its forms on political action. But the last hour is a political notion. It is the "people" who define their opponents and not *vice versa*, the decision which in the last resort distinguishes between friend and enemy is political. Once this decision—which may initially be a silent one—has been taken, strategy will develop its "specific" demands'. André Glucksmann: *Le Discours de la Guerre*, Paris, 1967, pp. 309–310.

⁶² 'Many theories of natural science are held to be true not only because they were so considered when natural scientists originated them, but because they have been verified in subsequent scientific practice', 'On practice', *Selected Works*, Vol. I, pp. 304–305.

distinction that inaugurated it, the distinction counterposing internal decision and external causality. The logical manipulation of a contradiction progressively reduces the role of external factors. From differences to contradictions, from their multiplicity to the principal contradiction, from the doublet of aspects (principal/secondary) to the asymmetry of their development (unevenness), there must always be a move from the exterior, which may pose the terms of the problem, to the interior, which resolves it. The manipulation of real contradictions reaches the same conclusion, situating the decision 'among the people' within the productive forces, the protracted war and culture, and in the persuasive discussion that fixes the relation between the three. The primacy of the internal decision defines one of the two 'world outlooks' that Mao judges to be basic—his own.⁶³

This conception has essentially revealed itself to be a theory of decision. In its framework, the deterrent threat is posed as a paper tiger: it cannot govern the basic political decision, it is not the 'principal contradiction'. 'The destiny of China is decided by the Chinese people, and the destiny of the world by the peoples of the world, and not by the nuclear weapon'.⁶⁴

Anyone unfamiliar with Mao Tse-tung's theory of politics risks hearing no more here than an echo of the optimistic fatalism that Voltaire did justice to in his own day. But there is nothing of *Candide* about a thinker for whom victory never depends on an automatism, but on a theoretically 'correct', i.e. exact, line.⁶⁵

The true discussion does not bear on the consequences—which would be serious for everyone⁶⁶—of the possible utilization of atomic weapons. Nor on the fact that 'a world war can be prevented'.⁶⁷ But on the means to avoid this utilization, i.e. on the function that should be allotted to atomic terror in international relations: 'The question that is posed in reality is to know what policy to adopt'.⁶⁸

The terror that opens up the perspective of an atomic war exists. So do 'revolutionary' wars. A Communist leader takes both aspects into account. If he is Chinese he reckons that revolutionary war must become the principal aspect ('despise nuclear blackmail strategically'), since the nuclear risk is seen, but defined as basically subordinate ('take full account of the opposing force tactically'). Inversely for the Soviets: 'the nuclear weapons and missiles that have come into being in the middle of the century have changed the old idea of war'.⁶⁹ Wars, all

⁶³ 'On Contradiction', Section I: 'The Two World Outlooks', *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 311.

⁶⁴ *Peking Review*, No. 42, October 16th, 1964, Special Supplement, p. (iii).

⁶⁵ 'On the Policy concerning Industry and Commerce', *Selected Works*, Vol. IV, p. 204: 'All comrades in the Party should understand that the enemy is now completely isolated. But his isolation is not tantamount to our victory. If we make mistakes in policy, we shall still be unable to win victory' (February, 1948).

⁶⁶ 'Enormous chaos', the disappearance 'of a third or a half' of the world's population (Mao Tse-tung in Moscow, November 11th, 1957).

⁶⁷ Declaration of the Chinese Government, September 1st, 1963.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* With reference to their definition of politics, the Chinese leaders accuse the Soviets of forgetting that war is a continuation of politics.

⁶⁹ Letter from the CC of the CPSU, July 14th, 1963.

wars, are subordinate to this question: 'Peaceful co-existence is not simply the absence of war, nor is it a temporary and precarious truce between two wars; it is the co-existence of two opposed social systems, based on the mutual rejection of the use of war as a means to settle differences between states.'⁷⁰

In both cases one 'aspect' acts on the other. The Chinese authorities believe that the extension of 'revolutionary' wars decreases the risks of nuclear war because it imposes another type of decision (it 'demonetarizes' the nuclear threat) and because it weakens the 'imperialist camp'. Reciprocally, nuclear peace, according to the Soviets, must open 'peaceful roads' to socialism.

Each thesis is as 'dialectical' as the other, if we care to designate by this great name the simple idea of an interaction between the two aspects. They are radically contradictory as to what is judged to be the decisive aspect, the Chinese qualifying as 'nuclear fetishism' the idea of basing policy on deterrence: 'In the eyes of the Soviet leaders, the whole world and the whole history of humanity should gravitate about the nuclear weapon.'⁷¹

Nuclear armament does not produce a Copernican revolution in politics for anyone who reasons within the serried architecture of Mao Tse-tung's thought. Whatever the forms of contradiction envisaged, the decisive aspect is perpetually sought 'among the people' in a dialogue determined as the inverse of coercion. Terror is always exclusive (exercised on the enemy), never inclusive. It is never the source of meaning and community as it was in the *Phenomenology of Mind*, as Hegel claimed it has been throughout Christian civilization.

Hence we should not suspect affectation in the occasionally heroic tone of Chinese declarations.⁷² Heroism is not opposed to their reason, nor does it transcend it. It, too, is a 'judicious way to deal with contradictions' by the affirmation of the 'people' as the source of every decision. From Mao Tse-tung's view-point, the contradiction in the world situation lends itself to two approaches. As in every contradiction it is possible to privilege external factors (weapons) or internal factors (peoples)—two 'world outlooks' are here irreducibly opposed: the only two, the two that already shared the world of thought according to *On Contradiction* (final version, 1951).

Whoever judges from within the framework of Mao Tse-tung's thought will not hear the deterrent discourse, he will not understand that shared terror may be the basis for a community, and give a meaning, a policy and a future to the word humanity. This is not a matter of some

⁷⁰ 'In adopting its new programme, our great Party solemnly declares before the whole of humanity that it regards it as the principal target of its foreign policy not only to avoid world war, but to ban wars for ever from the life of society, within the lifetime of the present generation', N. Khrushchev, XXIIInd Congress of the CPSU.

⁷¹ Declaration, September 1st, 1963.

⁷² 'In the eyes of the Soviet leaders, in the nuclear era in which we live, we can do no more than survive, our target no longer exists . . . Each has his own ideal and we must not measure others according to our own lights', *ibid*.

anecdotal and contingent opinions on the atomic danger. Still less a bluff. The Chinese are neither blind nor deaf: in so far as they refer themselves to Mao Tse-tung's thought, they think differently, on the basis of a theory of decision that will not allow that world order can be born positively out of equality in Terror.⁷³

Mao Tse-tung rejects the Hegelian solution, the struggle to the death. For him as for Clausewitz after Jena, 'resistance' is sacred. The absolute fear of death never becomes the negativity of the spirit, it absolutely defines the slave, and the fascinating fear of nuclear death, 'the nuclear slave'. 'Marxism contains many principles which in the last analysis come down to a single sentence: it is right to rebel.'⁷⁴

⁷³ Hence the claim that nuclear weapons are no more significant politically than other weapons of mass destruction (gas, micro-biological weapons, etc) and that the latter should be proscribed in the same way.

⁷⁴ 'Speech at Yen-an on Stalin's 60th Birthday', quoted in *Peking Review*, April 10th, 1967.