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In 1938, *The History of the CPSU(b)* was published, which included Stalin's essay 'On Dialectical and Historical Materialism' [1]. This essay has also frequently been published as a separate offprint; for example, the KFML (Communist League (Marxist-Leninist) - t.n.) did so in 1967. Bo Gustafsson, one of the founders of the KFML, wrote an afterword [2] to this pamphlet, which will be discussed below.

Stalin's essay is an excellent introduction to dialectical and historical materialism; it is well worth reading. However, the essay contains certain errors and shortcomings, which Bo Gustafsson points out in his afterword. Most of Bo Gustafsson's criticism of Stalin's presentation was correct and need not be repeated here. Nor does Bo Gustafsson's criticism offer anything new in relation to Mao Zedong's criticism of Stalin's theories. The problem, however, is that Bo Gustafsson himself makes certain errors when he seeks to correct or criticise Stalin. This applies first and foremost to the explanation of the first fundamental law.

The three fundamental laws of dialectics

There are three fundamental laws of dialectics, of which the first is primary and the other two are derived.

1. The law of the unity and struggle of opposites
2. The law of the transition from quantitative to qualitative change
3. The law of the negation of the negation

Bo Gustafsson quite rightly comments that:

“These laws cannot, of course, be assigned numerical values like certain laws of nature, regularities or psychological laws. But, like such less general laws, these three fundamental laws of dialectical materialism also express a constant, essential and necessary connection in the movement and development of nature, society and thought.”[3]

With regard to the first fundamental law, Bo Gustafsson explains it as follows:

“According to the law of the struggle and unity of opposites, all phenomena are composed of opposites which, on the one hand, presuppose and condition one another but, on the other hand, also exclude one another. Under capitalism, the existence of capitalists presupposes the existence of wage labourers, for without wage labourers the capitalists cannot remain capitalists. But these two opposites simultaneously exclude one another, since capitalists can only remain capitalists

by exploiting wage labourers, i.e. by not allowing them to become capitalists but keeping them in their position as the wage-labouring class. Thus, in order for the capitalist to continue to exist as a capitalist, he is compelled to maintain his own opposite: the wage labourer.”[4]

However, Bo Gustafsson’s comment later in the same paragraph shows that he has not really understood the law of the unity and struggle of opposites. He writes:

“The unity of opposites in the class struggle is expressed in the shorter periods of relative equilibrium and stagnation, whilst the struggle of opposites corresponds to the longer periods of increasing dominance by one side and rapidly advancing (my emphasis). The struggle of opposites is therefore always more essential, more necessary, more important and stronger than the unity of opposites.”

This is a formidable misunderstanding of this fundamental principle. The unity consists in the fact that the proletariat and the bourgeoisie presuppose and condition one another: they represent opposite sides of a contradiction. That unity has existed ever since capitalism emerged in Sweden from the 1870s onwards, and that unity persists to this day. Throughout this entire period, the bourgeoisie - the capitalists - have constituted the dominant side in this contradiction. During the same period, the struggle has ebbed and flowed. That struggle has, during the same period, taken a variety of forms: the struggle for workers’ right to organise politically and trade unionistically at all, hunger riots, mass demonstrations, strike movements, the struggle against anti-trade union legislation and the struggle against the bureaucratisation of the trade unions, the struggle against factory closures, redundancies and workplace accidents, and so on. Even if, at the time of writing, not a single strike were taking place, this would not mean that there were any sort of harmony between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. That would be like two becoming one, rather than one splitting into two. On the contrary, there is a constant struggle against the concrete manifestations of capital’s power, not only in the workplace but throughout society as a whole. The only way to abolish this contradiction is for the hitherto subordinate side, the proletariat, to seize power and establish itself as the dominant side – that is, to carry out a revolution. Then the contradictions will not, in themselves, disappear, but will manifest themselves in the form of a new unity at a higher level and new forms of struggle, but with the proletariat as the ruling class.

It is also worth noting that, in an informal conversation in 1964 with close colleagues, Mao Zedong questioned two of the fundamental laws:

“Engels spoke of three categories, but as far as I am concerned, I do not believe (xiangxin) in two of these categories. (The unity of opposites is the most fundamental law; the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa is the unity of opposites in terms of quality and quantity; and the negation of the negation does not exist at all (fouding zhi fouding genben mei you).”[5]

My personal view is that the law of the transition of quantitative changes into qualitative ones is useful in the class struggle, but that I cannot recall ever having derived any benefit from the law of the negation of the negation.

Bo Gustafsson's lack of understanding of dialectics was also evident in his definition of the principal contradiction in Sweden, which later had practical consequences for the line taken towards the Left Party Communists in the 1973 election. Bo Gustafsson was the most ardent advocate within the KFML/SKP of the view that the principal contradiction lay between monopoly capital and the people. The KFML/SKP was the only Maoist party in a capitalist and imperialist country in the world which, until the mid-1970s, advocated this principal contradiction. Mao Zedong [\[6\]](#) – and the other Maoist parties in the imperialist bloc – maintained that the principal contradiction lay between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This principal contradiction could – and can – of course change under specific conditions, either due to external aggression or an imminent threat of a fascist seizure of power. The principal contradiction in dependent neo-colonial countries may, once again, be a different one.

Presumably, the view that the principal contradiction was between monopoly capital and the people was merely a legacy of the old SKP's (that is the Communist Party of Sweden up to 1967 – t.n.) rhetoric about big finance versus the people. But this principal contradiction obscured the fact that two poles—namely, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie—stood opposed to one another, and gave the impression that not only the petty bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeois intermediate strata, but also the non-monopolistic strata of the bourgeoisie, could be won over to the revolution. Thus, there was no fundamental difference from Khrushchev's anti-monopolist two-stage revolution. As early as in the *Communist Manifesto*, it is clear that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels view the proletariat and the bourgeoisie as two opposing poles, with the petty bourgeoisie—mainly peasants and small business owners—constituting a wavering force torn between the two. What is new is that, as capitalism has developed, a petty-bourgeois intermediate stratum has gradually emerged, comprising, on the one hand, formally wage-earners who hold various managerial or supervisory roles, and, on the other, self-employed professionals.

Bo Gustafsson was also a driving force behind the idea of a 'United Left' campaign, i.e. the SKP proposed technical electoral cooperation with the Left Party Communists (VpK) ahead of the 1973 election. The idea of a 'United Left' was also the result of a gross overestimation of the party's own strength. The idea of a 'United Left' was undoubtedly conceived in the days following the large 1 May rally (which gathered 50,000 people – t.n.) at Norra Bantorget in 1972. The 'United Left' campaign was pushed through using coup-like tactics within the SKP; the proposal quickly degenerated into a package deal, in which the dividing lines between the SKP and the VpK were blurred. Doubts began to arise regarding the KFML/SKP's *raison d'être*. This 'United Left' line was summarised in the resolution 'Unite all communists in a strong communist party!', which was adopted at the SKP's first congress in the second half of 1973. This resolution suggested that a merger between the two organisations was possible. Two were to

be united into one. The differences were reduced to the question of ‘communist trade union branches’ and to the question of ‘what socialism would look like’. But the decisive dividing line was, of course, the path to socialism, i.e. that the Vpk advocated the peaceful path to socialism via parliament and that the VpK regarded the Soviet Union as a socialist state. In short, the conflict was essentially between Marxism-Leninism and revisionism. As early as the following year, the SKP clarified its line towards the Soviet Union through its campaign against Soviet social-imperialism, and at the SKP’s second congress in 1976, the United Left campaign was condemned.

It is worth noting that, after being expelled from the SKP in 1977, Bo Gustafsson quickly became a Social Democrat. As early as 1983, in the book *Marx & Marxism – see After 45 Years*^[7]– he renounced the Soviet Union, the Comintern, Lenin and Stalin. Was Bo Gustafsson predestined to eventually become a reformist? Probably not; but if a theorist such as Bo Gustafsson had never really understood dialectics, one is doomed sooner or later to commit serious theoretical errors, which have practical consequences. However, this also requires that one has become bourgeoisified or has given up hope of ever succeeding in contributing to a socialist society. It is, however, not a requirement that fighters in either a socialist revolution or a national liberation war should have read and understood dialectical materialism; it is sufficient to adopt a proletarian class standpoint and be willing to fight.

On the downfall of slave societies

Elsewhere ^[8], Bo Gustafsson writes:

“This explanation naturally contains an element of truth. But the slave system was replaced by feudalism as a result of the struggle of opposites, that is, as a result of the class struggle. The oppressed class, the slaves, rose up against their oppressors, the slave-owners, and smashed their state.”

Bo Gustafsson criticises Stalin’s view that the main cause of the downfall of slave societies lay in the fact that the development of the productive forces came into conflict with the relations of production. This criticism is unfair. There is no example from antiquity in which slaves would have carried out such a successful uprising that they would have crushed the slave-owners’ state and established their own. The most famous uprising, the Spartacus revolt, ended in defeat. Of course, there were uprisings on a smaller scale, but one must examine in detail why slave societies around the world collapsed. France was the first country in Europe to transition to feudalism, but this transition was triggered by the Franks’ conquest of France in the late 5th century. Feudalism was a means of gradually organising the conquest. The only successful slave rebellion in the world took place in 1791 in Haiti, a rebellion that was directed just as much against the French colonial rulers. The Haitian slaves succeeded in defeating the French colonial troops, driving them out and formally abolishing slavery. Afterwards, however, a new domestic ruling class emerged, consisting of landowners and others.

Marxism and Questions of Linguistics

In 'After Thirty Years', Bo Gustafsson also comments on Stalin's work 'Marxism and Questions of Linguistics'. This work by Stalin is also, for the most part, sound, and, for example, refutes the theory that different classes have different languages. As long as different language varieties, dialects, slang and so on are mutually intelligible – that is to say, share a similar vocabulary, pronunciation and syntax, as well as a common origin – the language is essentially the same for the inhabitants of a country, regardless of class affiliation. Although I, on the one hand, and the King and representatives of the Wallenberg family (the equivalent of the Rockefeller family in the US – t.n.), on the other, belong to different classes, we speak the same language.

However, Stalin makes a curious mistake, which Bo Gustafsson fails to note. Stalin claims that language neither stands above the superstructure nor belongs to the superstructure or the foundation, i.e. the economic base. In response to the question 'Is it true that language is a superstructure upon the economic base?', Stalin replies:

'No, that is not true.'

Of course, language is not yet another superstructure upon the economic base; that would imply that there were two superstructures in every social system. On the other hand, language forms part of both the economic base – that is, the forces of production and relations of production – and the superstructure. Man's first means of production were his hands; the creation of tools probably preceded language, which emerged 60,000–100,000 years ago. No one knows for certain. Language is also a means of production; it facilitates mutual communication between people and the storage of knowledge. As early as in *Capital*, Marx distinguished between skilled and unskilled workers; a skilled worker can do the job of an unskilled worker, but not the other way round. A lathe operator in a machine shop can carry out a cleaner's job, but not the other way round. The lathe operator's specialist knowledge has been acquired primarily through language. A hotel receptionist, translator or engineer, etc., who is proficient in several languages, is naturally more productive than their competitors under capitalism who are proficient in only one language.

The superstructure of a society consists of the prevailing political, legal, religious and philosophical views and the 'corresponding political, legal and other institutions', primarily the state apparatus. All these views **are expressed through language**, and the representatives of the state apparatus, who are made of flesh and blood, **communicate through language**. It is well known that conquerors throughout history – colonialists and imperialists – have used language as a repressive tool against the conquered and subjugated in order to break their will to resist, by preventing the use of their language or simply banning it.

Language, therefore, does not float freely above societies or classes. It is an integral part of both the base and the superstructure.

Incidentally, Stalin does not seem to be aware that the Normans conquered England in 1066, which led to French becoming the language of the ruling class at least until the end of the 14th century.

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[1] See *The History of the CPSU(b)*, Proletärkultur 1979, pp. 107–134, or *On Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, a pamphlet published by the Communist League of Marxist-Leninists in 1967 (probably difficult to obtain). *The History of the CPSU(b)* is available online – here: https://www.maoistisktforum.org/1_m_skrif/mlm_dok/lenin/SUKPbHist/SUKPBhist_inledning00.htm

[2] See https://www.marxistarkiv.se/profiler/bo_gustafsson/efter_trettio_ar.pdf

[3] Cited work

[4] Cited work

[5] Schram, *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed*, p. 226; for the original, see *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* [Long live the thought of Mao Zedong] (n.p.: n.p., August 1969), p. 558.

[6] See ‘On Contradictions’, Mao Zedong on Philosophical Questions. Oktoberförlaget 2016, pp. 69–70

[7] See the appendix in Bo Gustafsson’s ‘After 30 Years’

[8] See Bo Gustafsson’s ‘After 30 Years’