

Comments on Alejandro R. Montaña's Paper on the Negation of the Negation

1. Introductory Musings

A few years ago an RCP member told me that the Party recognized that it was not publishing its theoretical journal *Revolution* frequently enough, and moreover that it was not involving people outside the Party sufficiently in either its practical or theoretical work. He said that a plan had been developed to change this, that *Revolution* would henceforth be published quarterly on schedule, and that contributions would be actively solicited from within and without the Party.

It didn't happen. Why not? Because, despite what my RCP friend told me, in my opinion the Party does *not* really want to hear the ideas and opinions of others. In fact, I doubt the top leaders of the Party even truly want to hear the ideas and opinions of their own rank and file members.

The RCP has, I believe, published just *four* issues of *Revolution* during the 1990s, and the most recent was the Fall 1994 issue—three full years ago. This is pathetic! It indicates to me that the Party not only does not want to hear the theoretical thinking of non-members and its own rank and file members, but that even its own leadership is not doing much in the way of theoretical thinking. It is, apparently, *afraid* of the thinking of others, and short on thinking itself.

2. Overall Appraisal

The absurdity of such a situation is all the more glaring in light of the important thinking that does go on all the time by revolutionaries, in and outside of the RCP. A very fine example of this is Alejandro Montaña's paper defending the importance and correctness of the negation of the negation in dialectics.

I think the theme of this paper is completely correct, and a number of points made in it are quite profound. (Of course dialectics is an inherently profound subject!) It is obvious that a great deal of consideration has gone into the paper, and even those who may view it as fundamentally mistaken should at least recognize that it is an important contribution to the discussion of this topic. One of its virtues is that it really makes the reader think too. It is just the sort of paper that *should* be published in *Revolution* even if the RCP does disagree with it. The RCP leaders could write a criticism or rebuttal and print them both together. If they did this sort of thing the whole revolutionary movement would be ahead; we would at least be doing some important collective *thinking!* It is a pity that the RCP is unwilling or incapable of doing this.

Even worse than the fact that the RCP doesn't publish papers like this is the fact that they seldom even *respond* to them. Are they "too busy"? Incapable? Just not interested? Or what?!

3. Stylistic Criticisms

Although I am quite impressed with and enthusiastic about Montaña's paper, I do have a few criticisms and suggestions to make. I'll start with the more trivial things about format and style.

The paper is in the form of a letter to Bob Avakian, and as such refers to Avakian as "you" and so forth. I think it should be revised in the form of an article. One reason for saying this is that I think the author (or perhaps our fledgling discussion group as a whole—with the author's permission, of course) should undertake to publish it since the RCP will not do so. It could perhaps be a small pamphlet, or "occasional paper", or posted on the Internet, or even an article in a new journal. Something to think about! But if it is to be any of these things, I think it would be better if it were in an article format instead of a letter.

I found a couple of the author's stylistic idiosyncrasies to be distracting, and suspect that others may too. Therefore, I suggest that:

- The ampersand (&) should not be used for the word 'and'.
- The smaller font within normal parenthetical remarks should not be used.

4. The "Big Bang"

Montaña gives several good illustrations of the negation of the negation, such as in the example of grinding barley into flour. The nucleosynthesis example is good too, but one thing may detract from it and cause problems for some people: the reference to the "Big Bang".

The Big Bang theory is almost universally accepted these days by cosmologists, and there is some important evidence for it (e.g., the cosmic background radiation). But it is still quite possible that it is completely wrong, and virtually certain (in my opinion) that it cannot be completely correct, as commonly presented. Think about how preposterous the whole idea is: the whole universe is supposed to have been created at one moment, "before which" not even time existed. Moreover, the "original" size of the entire universe is supposed to have been much less than that of a single proton! Of course religious people love the whole idea, and that is one of the major reasons why it has "triumphed" at present.

One cosmologist who couldn't buy all this was Nobel prize-winner Hannes Alfvén, who remarked that evidence for the Big Bang

is totally obliterated but the less there is of scientific support, the more fanatical is the belief in it. As you know this cosmology is utterly absurd—it claims that the whole of the universe was created at a certain instant as an exploding atomic bomb with a size much less than the head of a pin. It seems that in the present intellectual climate it is a great asset of the big bang cosmology that it offends common sense: (I believe because it is absurd.)

I won't say any more against the Big Bang theory here. But it should be noted that at least in *Marxist* circles the theory should still be considered highly dubious (at least in its complete form as championed by Steven Hawking, et al.). Consequently, I think it is wrong to treat it as well-established science as Montaña does (p. 22). Doing so will also cause problems for readers who disagree with the Big Bang (or at least wish to withhold judgment on it). It may even give an opening to attack the paper as a whole, even though this is just a peripheral point.

It seems to me that the nucleosynthesis or stellar evolution example is just as good if reference to the Big Bang is dropped completely (even though it is supposed to be the explanation for the origin of

hydrogen and most the helium in the present universe). But if it is mentioned, it should be done more critically or skeptically.

5. The Instantaneous Motion Discussion

I thought the weakest of the extended examples was that on instantaneous motion and calculus (pp. 31-34). This example doesn't seem to add much to the whole argument. And even though only simple algebra is actually used, the fact that is *about* that scary thing the calculus is almost guaranteed to frighten and intimidate some readers.

If this discussion is to be retained it should be tightened up and clarified a bit. In my opinion the statement of the contradiction of mechanical motion by Hegel (quoted on p. 31) is more mystifying than helpful—despite what Lenin says. (It should be recognized that a fully satisfying discussion of motion is very difficult; I am not sure that *anyone* has yet accomplished it from either a physical or philosophical point of view.)

One point that needs to be made clearer in this discussion is that Marx's procedure does *not* involve division by zero (as has been claimed by some). It is true, as Montaña remarks at the bottom of page 32, that at a certain point in his procedure Marx sets $t_1 = t_0$ (which constitutes the negation of the negation). But the division by the quantity $t_1 - t_0$ takes place before that point, when the two times are not taken to be the same.

Even so, I think many people who have studied calculus will view Marx's procedure as something like sleight of hand and will prefer the standard modern development of derivatives using limits. Perhaps it might prove useful to give a philosophical explication (in terms of the negation of the negation) of this standard method (as limits approach zero, etc.).

I guess what I am suggesting is that either nothing should be said about instantaneous motion and the calculus in the paper, or else a lot more should be said about it.

6. The Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis Conception

One point which I don't recall being in the paper, but which should be, is a discussion of the "thesis/antithesis/synthesis" conception of dialectics. What does the author think of this traditional Hegelian formulation? I believe Engels ridiculed it once as being grossly simplistic. But the concept of the negation of the negation seems to lead directly to it. I'm curious myself what Montaña might have to say about all this.

7. More Attention Should Be Paid to the Incorrect Examples of the Negation of the Negation Adduced by its Opponents

Despite my criticism of the calculus example, I think the author's positive illustrations of the negation of the negation are generally very good. But in order to get those opposed to the concept of the negation of the negation to see the error of their ways it is also necessary to show precisely why the phony examples which they adduce are in fact phony. Montaña did a bit of this. But I think that every one of their examples should be examined in turn, showing why what they posit as the negation of the negation is not in fact so, and what the real negation of the negation should be considered to be.

One of the very most crucial things to understand about dialectics, which Montaña properly quotes Engels on, is that “Dialectics is nothing more than the science of the most general laws of motion and development in Nature, human society and thought.” But because dialectical laws are abstracted from all of science, and are therefore very abstract and general, there is always going to be some question of how exactly they are to be applied in specific cases. It is certainly possible to misapply these dialectical laws, as was done for example by Lysenko. It would even be possible to argue (although no Marxist, I am sure, has ever done so) that biological evolution is “undialectical” (because it is a more or less gradual process, etc.). Of course when we Marxists look at evolution we see all kinds of dialectical leaps within the overall general gradualness. And evolutionary theory itself has been modified to incorporate more and more such leaps (e.g., with the Eldridge/Gould theory of punctuated equilibrium). But evolution is still pretty much a gradual process overall. The same could be said about heating water on a stove; it is a gradual process which incorporates a myriad of small dialectical leaps (when each molecule is sped up after bumping into the heated metal pot or other hotter water molecules). Eventually there is an overall qualitative leap (the water boils), but this does not mean that there are not gradual processes in nature (even though they may in fact always consist of numerous small leaps). Perhaps leaps are primary; but gradualness still exists. And it is easy to think that leaps must exist where in fact they do not (or vice versa!).

In a similar way, it is possible to misidentify negations of negations. It might be interesting to explore how and why this is typically done. (Sounds like a good Ph.D. project for an academic Marxist!) Because it is so easy to make this sort of error, it is all the more necessary to show how to do it correctly, and why doing it incorrectly does not disprove the general law of the negation of the negation.

8. Mao Himself May Not Have Really Opposed the Negation of the Negation

Montaña says at the beginning of his paper that he hates to disagree with somebody of Mao’s stature on the issue of the negation of the negation. But it has been argued that Mao himself was not really (or perhaps not consistently) opposed to the law and merely objected to the name given to it. I think this possibility should be at least mentioned. One summary of Mao’s views on this topic occurs in Nick Knight’s introduction to the book *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990), pp. 15-24. Knight says there is only the one reported informal conversation by Mao (on Aug. 18, 1964) in which he seems to deny the existence of the law of the negation of the negation, while “it is possible to find many other positive references to this category in his writings from the 1930s to the 1960s, and the existence of these references calls into question the propriety of taking this one reference as final proof that Mao had cut his links with the orthodox Marxist philosophical tradition.” (p. 19)

If Mao really did hold an incorrect position on this issue, we must not be afraid of criticizing him. But the point here is that Mao’s position is itself at least subject to dispute.

9. The Nature of Necessity

There are frequent references to necessity in the paper, but the author’s view of necessity is not fully explained. I realize this is a major topic in itself, but I am a little bit concerned that at present the impression may be given that Montaña is championing some type of fatalism (i.e., necessity *regardless of what people may do*). Necessity in society, properly understood, means of course “what must happen in light of what people *will* do.”

I believe that Montaña is mainly arguing here that necessity (in nature or society) cannot be adequately explained without the concept of the negation of the negation. I suspect he is right about that,

but this is a philosophically deep (hard!) point, and I for one would like to think about it some more, and see more discussion about it.

10. A Small Quibble (or Is it Just That?)

As you might expect in any paper of this sort, there are a few things here and there that somebody might quibble with. One such is the statement on page 37 that “A contradiction has an inherent directionality defined by the initial & final states. This is an assertion of *necessity*.” Is this perhaps something that is generally true, but not always? What about the simple case of water which can be heated until it boils and turns to steam, or cooled until it freezes into ice? What is the inherent directionality of water? You might say, well in one case (unremitting application of heat) it is towards steam, while in the other case (unremitting removal of heat) it is towards ice. But in a simple case like this all talk of “inherent directionality” seems either trivial or disingenuous. It is not at all like the case of society developing from primitive communism to slave society to feudalism to capitalism to communism, with no real possibility of returning to feudalism from capitalism for example. The “inherent directionality” of some contradictions is far more significant than with others.

Of course there is always more that can be said about any topic, and this is a paper I am discussing, not a book. Still, there are plenty of places where the discussion could easily be expanded, or where provocative issues like “inherent directionality” are just mentioned in passing.

11. What Is the Political Import of the Paper?

The big question in the back of my mind as I read Montaño’s paper, however, was this: What errors (if any) in the *political line* of the RCP might be said to derive from this philosophical error of denying the law of the negation of the negation? Does it really matter all that much in practice if they are wrong on this philosophical point? I suspect that it does, but I would like to see the author add something about this to the paper.

One thing that comes to mind here is the Party’s well-known revolutionary impetuosity, and expectations of imminent revolution. This suggests that they fail to see the complexity of the path to revolution, that they fail to see that numerous negations of negations are necessary to reach the moment of insurrection. It is not a simple matter of communists constantly calling upon the masses to “make revolution” until the masses finally wake up and do so!

The Party opposes participation in most reformist struggles of the masses for example, on the grounds that this is not “revolutionary” work. They in fact oppose what Lenin called the basic Marxist strategy of participating in the day-to-day struggles of the masses and bringing the light of revolution into those struggles. This seems to me to be a failure to see the ultimate *revolutionary* possibilities present in immediate *reformist* work (if it is done correctly). And that in turn shows a failure to understand the possibility of the negation of the negation in this sphere.

12. Conclusion

Although I have criticized Montaño’s paper on a number of points and feel that it could be improved in some ways, I want to reiterate that I think the paper is very good, and very important. Even if no changes at all are made in it, I think it is important that it be published. I really hope this can be done.

I want to add that although I have read the paper fairly carefully, I believe it is well worthy of rereading and further consideration on my part. I feel I have not yet given it the full and careful attention it deserves. I hope to have time to get back to it soon.

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