


Mao's "On Contradiction," Mao-Hegel/Mao-Deleuze

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Kenneth Surin,

"Mao's *On Contradiction*, Mao-Hegel/Mao-Deleuze"

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Special Issue ***Rethinking Critical Theory and Maoism***. Ed. Kang Liu

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Abstract: Mao Tse-Tung's famous 1937 essay "On Contradiction" is regarded as a significant attempt to redefine and reapply Marx's notion of a "dialectical contradiction" to the Chinese revolutionary conjuncture of Mao's time. I set out the principles outlined in Mao's essay, before arguing that the revolutionary conjuncture of his time no longer exists in the era of globalization and neoliberalism. I conclude that a new conception of "antagonism" is needed, and revise Mao's position with the aid of the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari.

Kenneth SURIN

Mao's *On Contradiction*, Mao-Hegel/Mao-Deleuze

Mao Tse-Tung's 1937 essay "On Contradiction" is a landmark contribution to Marxist philosophy, though it is more often praised than analyzed. Mao, like Lenin and Marx before him, was interested in the logic(s) of change, and for all three "dialectical materialism" was the preeminent of these logics. For Marx, Lenin, and Mao, the defining feature of dialectical materialism, as a logic of change was the pivotal role it gave to the notion of antagonism, cast by them in terms of contradiction. My aim in this paper is to give an account of Mao's position on contradiction, and then to suggest that his insights on this issue can be retained, more or less faithfully, if recast in terms of a post-Hegelian conception of antagonism, involving the replacement of contradiction by a suppler set of categories which encapsulate all the principles associated with antagonism, but without the conceptual and practical inflexibility built into the notion of contradiction. Mao greatly modified the Hegelian-Marxist notion of contradiction to take China's unique situation into account, but he was still beholden to an orthodoxy represented by these Hegelian-Marxist rubrics. That is to say, Mao was absolutely correct to say that historical, social, political, and economic processes are riven by antagonism, but, to depart from Mao, these antagonisms are not necessarily, or best, explained by the concept of contradiction.¹

For the Marxist philosopher, all the above-mentioned processes are in a state of constant transformation—transformations which reflect, even as they purport to resolve, the antagonisms integral to these processes. Mao sought ways to theorize the Chinese embodiment of these (for him, antagonistic and contradictory) transformations, at a level both abstract and yet attentive to the uniquely specific.

Mao begins "On Contradiction" by retaining Marx's insight that capitalism involves a social system beset by contradictions because the social classes within it have incompatible class-bound goals. Following Marx and Lenin, Mao said these incompatibilities would lead to class conflict, economic crisis, and eventually revolution. In this revolution, the existing order would be supplanted by the oppressed classes, who would now possess the means to obtain political power. To quote Mao:

Changes in society are due chiefly to the development of the internal contradictions in society, that is, the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the contradiction between classes and the contradiction between the old and the new', it is the development of these contradictions that pushes society forward and gives the impetus for the supersession of the old society by the new. (70)

Mao believed, somewhat simplistically, that there were two opposing worldviews, which he called the "metaphysical" and the "dialectical-materialist" (68-71). The former, deeply idealist (in the pejorative sense), had long prevailed in both the east and west.

Again, perhaps simplistically, Mao maintained that historical forces enabled the European proletariat to find their way towards dialectical materialism, while the European bourgeoisie remained resolutely immured in the realm of "metaphysical", and thus were unable to grasp how historical forces really operated. This blinded them to how exploitation takes place, not just in their own capitalist societies, but even in precapitalist societies (e.g. in slavery).

Mao next follows Lenin in suggesting that contradiction is universal:

[C]ontradiction exists in the process of development of all things, and ... in the process of development of each thing a movement of opposites exists from beginning to end.... There is nothing that does not contain contradiction; without contradiction nothing would exist.... Contradiction is universal and absolute, it is present in the process of development of all things and permeates every process from beginning to end. (72-74)

This, to say the least, is a highly metaphysical claim. Mao was of course addressing his argument to comrades in a revolutionary situation, in which volatile and ever-changing conditions were the norm. "Contradiction" was a theoretical tool available to him at that time and in that circumstance, one extremely useful for a sense-making of these conditions and his revolutionary political practice,

¹ All references to the English translation of Mao's "On Contradiction" will be to the version in Žižek; as will be references to Mao's "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People" (famous for containing the expression "Let a Hundred Flowers Blossom, let a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend", 153); and's "On Practice." Pagination to these essays will be given in the main body of my text. Useful background to Mao's 1937 texts ("On contradiction"; "On Practice") is to be found in Liu.

especially the need to form a united front, between the Communists and their sworn enemies the Nationalists, to counter the invasion by Japan in 1937. Today, in very different circumstances and very different intellectual formations, we have the advantage of being able to use a different theoretical nomenclature to express (hopefully) Mao's insights into a revolutionary political practice, for our time as much as Mao's.

At the same time as he asserts the universality of contradiction, Mao acknowledges the sheer particularity inherent in the practical instances of contradiction:

In considering each form of motion of matter, we must observe the points which it has in common with other forms of motion. But what is especially important and necessary, constituting as it does the foundation of our knowledge of a thing, is to observe what is particular to this form of motion of matter, namely, to observe the qualitative difference between this form of motion and other forms. Only when we have done so can we distinguish between things. Every form of motion contains within itself its own particular contradiction. This particular contradiction constitutes the particular essence which distinguishes one thing from another. (76)

The flexibility in Mao's notion of contradiction comes to the fore in his discussion of the difference between the "the principal contradiction and principal aspect of contradiction". Under capitalism the principal contradiction is between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, whereas in feudalism the principal contradiction was the one between the emerging bourgeoisie and the feudal overlords (78). The former contradiction is resolved by the socialist revolution, the latter was overcome by the democratic revolution.

From the principal contradiction stem secondary contradictions ("its aspects"). For instance, according to Wang Hui, the principal contradiction in China today, is the one between entry into the capitalist world market ("globalization") and the project of a democratic socialism. From this primary contradiction other contradictions arise, such as the developmental disparity between regions (China's eastern coastal region and provinces in the far interior), a disparity between rural and urban incomes, and the growing disparity between the rich and poor. Another disparity is the one between China's two development models, the "Guangdong model" (focused on export-oriented development) and the "Chongqing model" (focused on internally-driven development).

Mao said that "[p]rocesses change, old processes and old contradictions disappear, new processes and new contradictions emerge, and the methods of resolving contradictions differ accordingly" (78). With such change, what was a secondary contradiction can become a principal contradiction, and vice versa. Mao emphasizes the need to pay the utmost attention to the often complex and not always self-evident relationships between the primary and secondary contradictions, since only in this way can the revolutionary find ways conducing to their "resolution". The revolutionary response to such an upheaval in the specific configuration of contradictions involved has necessarily and unavoidably to be political:

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, when the two are both interdependent and in contradiction, and also after the interdependence breaks down. It is of great importance to study these problems. Lenin meant just this when he said that the most essential thing in Marxism, the living soul of Marxism, is the concrete analysis of concrete conditions. (79)

Mao at this point is a firm Hegelian, retaining Hegel's stress on identity and unity, even while acknowledging difference. A contradiction depends on the existence of one or more of its opposites, complexity thus involves an increased number of these opposites, simplicity only one or a few of them:

Without life, there would be no death; without death, there would be no life. Without 'above', there would be no 'below', without 'below', there would be no 'above'. Without misfortune, there would be no good fortune; without good fortune, there would be no misfortune. Without facility, there would be no difficulty; without difficulty, there would be no facility. Without landlords, there would be no tenant-peasants; without tenant-peasants, there would be no landlords. Without the bourgeoisie, there would be no proletariat; without the proletariat, there would be no bourgeoisie. Without imperialist oppression of nations, there would be no colonies or semi-colonies; without colonies or semi-colonies, there would be no imperialist oppression of nations. It is so with all opposites. (94)

Identity differentiates the contradictions and establishes a space for the antagonism between the contradictions. Identity is thus the underlying basis for the maintenance of contradictions.

Identity has a second characteristic—in the appropriate situation, the contradictory aspects within a thing can be transformed into their opposite, and when this occurs an aspect changes "its position to that of its opposite" (94). Mao at this point posits what is clearly a metaphysical logic:

...by means of revolution the proletariat, at one time the 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. This has already taken place in the Soviet Union, as it will take place throughout the world. If there were no interconnection and identity of opposites, in given conditions, how could such a change take place? (94-5)

For all Mao's emphasis on the concreteness of revolutionary praxis, is there not something of an incipient teleology at work in his argument, precisely because of his staunch a priori adherence to the principle of "the identity of opposites"? If revolutionary agency is "contained" within an a priori metaphysical logic, is the latter not somehow bound within the terms of this logic?

My (undogmatic) intuition here is that Mao was invoking this Hegelian-Marxist-Leninist theoretical armature because it had been employed so fruitfully in the most successful revolution at that point in the twentieth century (the October Revolution of 1917), and that even as he did this, he sought to widen it in profound and original ways when adapting it to China's proto-revolutionary circumstances.

This is clear from the admittedly brief section of Mao's essay titled "The Place of Antagonism in Contradiction", where for me he undoes, fundamentally, the metaphysical logic that had guided him up to this point. To quote him:

...we must make a concrete study of the circumstances of each specific struggle of opposites and should not arbitrarily apply the formula discussed above [the identity of opposites] to everything. Contradiction and struggle are universal and absolute, but the methods of resolving contradictions, that is, the forms of struggle, differ according to the differences in the nature of the contradictions. Some contradictions are characterized by open antagonism, others are not. In accordance with the concrete development of things, some contradictions which were originally non-antagonistic develop into antagonistic ones, while others which were originally antagonistic develop into non-antagonistic ones. (100)

Mao makes it clear here that contradiction and antagonism do not imply each other, and that there are contradictions which do not "mature" into antagonisms. An antagonism develops when a contradiction, hitherto dormant in its manifestations, grows into an openly visible enmity.

In his 1957 essay "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People", Mao, with a successful revolutionary insurrection having by now taken place in China, still acknowledged, with uncanny Althusserian echoes, that communist China was even then not without its contradictions, and that indeed "such struggles will never end" (155). Also, in this essay, the phrase "the unity of antagonism" was developed alongside "the identity or unity of contradiction"—antagonism existed between communism/socialism and their enemies, whereas contradictions (which Mao said were non-antagonistic) still existed in the worker-peasant alliance that was revolutionary China's bedrock (as the Cultural Revolution showed a few years later, Mao was being somewhat optimistic in calling this situation "non-antagonistic"). Writing and speaking in 1957, Mao was very alert to the 1956 Hungarian uprising, and thus conscious of the importance of acknowledging that while contradictions exist in a communist society, these contradictions nonetheless do not reach the point of antagonism, the latter a not totally convincing claim, given that the Cultural Revolution that was to take place a few years later.

Mao's 1957 essay addressed, sometimes in a very forthright manner, the social and economic impasses existing in communist China. At the same time, with the Hungarian situation in mind, Mao was concerned to show the Chinese people he accepted the existence of contradictions in China's communist project (which the Hungarian communist leadership had failed to do in its abject kneeling before the USSR), while mitigating or even denying the possible mutation in China of these contradictions into outright antagonisms (which had of course reached the point of explosion in Hungary). As a result, the central tenets of "dialectical materialism" are applied more loosely and flexibly in the 1957 essay, in contrast to its 1937 counterpart, which had of course addressed many of the same themes as the 1957 essay.

Given all this, is there a more productive way to conceptualize antagonism in the revolutionary conjuncture, both Mao's and the ones confronted by such present-day revolutionaries as

Subcomandante Marcos (a university teacher in philosophy who wrote his dissertation on Althusser and Foucault)?

Let a Hundred Flowers Blossom, let a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend

-- Mao Tse-Tung

As Mao himself said, the notions of contradiction and antagonism do not imply each other. This suggests the possibility of developing a concept of antagonism freed of the theoretical shackles imposed by the dialectical method, and its key category of contradiction.

Some forms of antagonism involve contradiction, many others do not. Mao was only concerned with contradictions which do or do not ensue in antagonism, but it would be helpful if we considered the reverse possibility, namely, that many antagonisms do not necessarily involve contradiction.

Here it is important to safeguard against anachronism. There is no way the historical Mao can be cast, or recast, as a Deleuzean—this would be stupid, as stupid as depicting the historical Ho Chi Minh or Che Guevara as Deleuzeans. Better, therefore, to refer to Mao from now on in this essay as an embodied form of consciousness, a conceptual persona, and to see if this form of consciousness or conceptual persona can be rendered compatible with an alternative theoretical armature, in this case a Deleuzean one. I shall refer to this Deleuzean inflection of Mao-consciousness as "Mao-Deleuze" (as opposed to, say, the very different "Mao-Hegel" of full-blown dialectical contradiction). That is to say, can there be something approximating to a political materialism, as opposed to a dialectical materialism in which contradiction always forms a theoretical and practical arch over antagonism?

In according primacy to the notion of antagonism, we are remaining faithful to Mao's central insight that the most important feature of any materialism is "the concrete development of things" (Mao 1937a, 100).

It is axiomatic that antagonisms are bound up with configurations of power and force—if X and Y are antagonists in a relation of aversion or hostility towards each other, then X and Y transmit and receive forces accordant with aversion of hostility, even if these are merely ideational or verbal. Of course, every living thing, qua living entity, receives and transmits forces-- bright sunlight impinging on an eye (which then transmits its own force by blinking), heavy rain falling on a leaf (which then transmits its own force by curling-up to reduce the impact of the rain), and so on. Hostility or aversion are, therefore, specific modalities of the forces transmitted in an antagonistic relationship, just as conviviality and affection are specific modalities of the forces involved in a friendly relationship, and so forth.

Every reception and transmission of forces constitutes an event or assemblage, which is unique in its particularity. Take the event that is the 1917 October Revolution. This is really a mega-event, or event of events—involved here is the event we may term "Lenin" (which in turn is made-up of other events), one termed "Trotsky" (likewise made-up of other events), one termed "Tsar Nicholas II" (an event which transmits and receives radically different forces from the events "Lenin" and "Trotsky"), the events of this or that named or unnamed revolutionary acting at the behest of the Bolsheviks, the events of this or that counter-revolutionary acting on behalf of the Tsar, the events of this or that spectator of a revolutionary episode (the seizing of a railway station, the arrest of a police chief loyal to the Tsar), and so forth.

What Lenin and the Bolsheviks did, in conjunction with a myriad of others, was to harness and configure the forces available at that time to constitute the event subsequently known as "the October Revolution". Mao and his cohorts, in his army as well as the countless peasants who supported the army, likewise undertook an "eventive constitution" of the above-mentioned kind in China's communist revolution.

These revolutionary events were irruptions that broke into and broke-up a prevailing order. These irruptions, though Lenin and Mao believed them to have a structure graspable in terms of the dialectic, really did not possess any such structure. Unless one assumes the virtual tautology that, under capitalism, forces transmitted by this or that capitalist structure or formation are always in a position to be countered by countervailing forces. Self-employed contractors stiffed by Donald Trump may only know of Marx by name, but they summon the merest countervailing forces the moment they sue Trump. Of course, it would be fanciful to pretend that this pushing-back against Trump creates by itself potentials for revolution, but what Lenin and Mao, in their place and time, accomplished was an orchestration of antagonistic forces on a scale massive enough to precipitate a revolution. They did not need the dialectic to bring about this truly immense event.

What enabled the constitution of revolutionary forces in Russia and China was a combination of enabling conditions and a plenitude of forms of agency capable of mobilizing in these conditions. The dialectic is in essence a fiction intended to mobilize agency, by positing initial a priori contradictions, which may or may not ensue in antagonisms, that could then be mapped onto actually existing historical and political conditions. The dialectic is an idealized template for revolutionary practice, no less but no more. Both Lenin and Mao embarked on their revolutionary projects with the aim of capturing state power. This conception of revolution as state-capture—involving the take-over of the railways, tv and radio stations, post offices, and ultimately the parliament and presidential palace, etc.—has run its course.

Revolution today, for a Mao-Deleuze, will be more complex and multi-faceted than the ones brought about by Mao and Lenin-- some aspects of it may be state-centered, but many of its components will come from mobilized concatenations of diverse "micro-experiences" (to use Raul Zibechi's term) not premised on the conquest of the state. A theorization of revolution not predicated (entirely) on capturing state power will have as its focal-point the irruptive event (which may fail or succeed as the basis for revolution), an event having the potentially countless attributes of antagonism (Mao-Deleuze), but without any overarching dialectical contradiction (Mao-Hegel). Mao-Hegel (and Marx!) had as his theoretical-practical terrain a capitalist system of accumulation bound up with a manifest imperialism and colonialism, whereas Mao-Deleuze operates in a terrain defined by neoliberalism and globalization (albeit possessing features belonging to a neocolonialism). Both terrains have deeply entrenched modes of capitalist expropriation and exploitation, but they operate with different politico-economic logics and ontological bases. In both cases, though, a Marxist analytical framework remains deeply salient.

The main shift required here is abandoning the dialectic as something of a transcendental entity underpinning Mao's (and Lenin's) ontology of revolutionary political practice. We note here that Mao endorses Lenin's statement that "dialectics in the proper sense is the study of contradiction in the very essence of objects" (Lenin 249). Instead of the dialectic (and its absolute reliance on the principle of contradiction or negation), we need a much more flexible and fluid mode of conceptual and practical organization which does justice to the dispositions of power and force operative in the present-day conjuncture, as opposed to the ones operating over a hundred years ago (Lenin) and eighty years ago (Mao). Historical context is of crucial importance here. While Mao was explicit in his disavowal of a mechanistic materialism, his writings on revolutionary practice focus overwhelmingly on the importance of objective processes, and the part played by "science" in validating knowledge of these processes. Processes identified as "subjective", even when these are generated collectively, do not receive much attention—in nearly every instance, subjectivity for Mao is individual or individualistic, and only the object and objectivity lend themselves to embodiments that are collective. Mao-Deleuze will seek to rectify this theoretico-practical imbalance (Deleuze and Guattari 90).

Mao-Hegel must give way to Mao-Deleuze, that is, the philosophy which prizes differentiation based on negation must give way to one that does justice to aleatory encounters, incommensurabilities, heterogeneities, pluralities, and irruptions and disruptions that rupture prevailing socio-economic formations. It should, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, link all kinds of "attractions and repulsions, sympathies, and antipathies, alterations, amalgamations, penetrations, and expressions that affect bodies of all kinds in their relations to one another" (90).

Before any surplus-value can be realized by capital there is politics, that is, the strategic employment of various assortments of force, and hence an ontology of force (as opposed to one dealing primarily with contradiction), is central and unavoidable. Force is generated and shaped by desire, which is always social and collective. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, it is desire, that makes the gun into a weapon of war, or the death penalty, or sport (as in the Olympic Games), or hunting, depending on extant circumstances (89-90). Desire is endlessly productive.

This recourse to a practical ontology of desiring-production, derived from Deleuze and Guattari, is essential if we are to account for the organization of a productive desire that is revolutionary. All this sounds highly recondite, but the principle invoked here simply elaborates what Marx himself had said, namely, that a society of the appropriate kind has to exist before capitalist appropriation of a commensurate kind can take place, so that a society/state with already positioned labor of the appropriate kind has to exist if the realization of surplus-value is to take place in that society. Put a Mongolian nomad-herder in a BMW car factory in today's Stuttgart and they will be in no position to realize surplus value, just as a cave-dweller would not know what a medieval wind mill was, let alone be able to use it to create surplus-value.

Capitalism today is an immense array of apparatuses, operating on many levels at a planetary scale, that, thanks to globalization, today encompasses all reachable spaces of accumulation. As a result, its

functioning is due to more than just the operation of forces at the institutional level of organizations and formations. Hence the need for the ontology of constitutive power which conceptualizes force, and not just in regard to its role in creating and consolidating a planetary-wide regime of accumulation.

Let us be reminded at this point of how Mao envisaged dialectical materialism's distinctive features:

The Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism has two outstanding characteristics. One is its class nature: it openly avows that dialectical materialism is in the service of the proletariat. The other is its practicality: it emphasizes the dependence of theory on practice, emphasizes that theory is based on practice and in turn serves practice. The truth of any knowledge or theory is determined not by subjective feelings, but by objective results in social practice. Only social practice can be the criterion of truth. The standpoint of practice is the primary and basic standpoint in the dialectical materialist theory of knowledge. (Mao, "On Practice" 54. Emphases are mine.)

This conceptualization of force we are about to identify with Mao-Deleuze, in retaining Mao's emphasis on practicality and those who create surplus-value for capitalism (Mao's proletariat), also encompasses two complementary facets: on one hand, the ways in which this force enables at once the emergence and consolidation of the various forms of collective subjectivity (as was pointed out, Mao-Hegel dealt primarily with the dialectical object, and hardly at all with the formation of collective subjectivity); on the other hand, the ways in which these forms make possible the means for capitalism to fashion the kinds of collective subjectivity (a "social morphology" in Deleuze's words) required for collective functioning (Deleuze, 180).

Next, we have to follow Deleuze (and Guattari) in connecting the notion of force with the concept of a singularity, primarily because it takes a psychic investment, and thus the activation of a force or ensemble of forces, to constitute a singularity. (The locus classicus of this account of psychic or libidinal investment in the writings of Deleuze and Guattari is their *Anti-Oedipus*).

If the universe is composed of absolute singularities, then production, any kind of production, can only take the form of repetition: each singularity, as production unfolds, can only repeat or propagate itself. In production, each singularity can only express its own difference, its distance or proximity, from everything else. Production, on this view which is adapted for Mao-Deleuze, is a ceaselessly proliferating distribution of all the myriad absolute singularities. Desiring-production is thus necessarily repetition of difference, the difference of each singularity from everything else, while these singularities are capable at the same time of being brought together in assemblages that constitute social groupings such as classes, clans, extended families, and nations.

Capitalism, however, also requires the operation of repetition. A capitalist logic, premised as it is on the notion of the exchange of commodities, can only base itself on notions of identity, equivalence, and intersubstitutivity, as Marx himself pointed out in his analysis of the logic of the commodity-form. This being so, capitalist repetition is always repetition of the sheer nondifference; the different in capitalism can never be more than the mere appearance of difference, because capitalist difference can always be overcome, and returned through the processes of abstract exchange, to what is always the same, the utterly fungible. (You buy a Toyota Corolla, I buy a Nissan Sentra, both of which are virtually identical in terms of appearance and performance, and yet the capitalist car companies who sell them must convince us that a world of difference, simulated of course, exists between the Toyota and Nissan. Mao-Hegel never was in the position of having to address this aspect of the capitalist simulacrum).

Capitalism, and this is a decisive principle in Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* project, only transforms in order to bring about a more powerful recuperation through exchange and exchange value. When capitalism breaches limits it does so only in order to impose its own limits, which it projects as the limits of the universe (for example, saying to us "only when the planet runs out of oil, coal, aluminum, etc.", but actually meaning "only when it is no longer viable for capitalists to extract oil, coal, aluminum, etc."). The power of repetition in capitalism is therefore entirely negative, wasteful, and lacking in any really productive force.

Any collective subjectivity constituted on the basis of this form of repetition will not be able to advance the cause of emancipation. The challenge, at once philosophical and political, posed by Mao-Deleuze has therefore to do with the supersession of this capitalist repetition by forms of a genuinely productive repetition that can break beyond the limits imposed on emancipation by the those who rule us. Only force, that is, politics, which of course is not the same as violence (at least not necessarily), can accomplish this.

For Mao-Deleuze, therefore, the ontology of this anti-capitalist power of counter-constitution must take the form of an ontology of force, as opposed to contradiction. It will therefore eschew the dialectics of Mao-Hegel.

In whatever embodiment, Mao Tse-Tung is immensely significant—he was the first theorist of capitalism, with the possible exception of Nikolai Bukharin, to grasp the centrality of exploited peasants in the production of surplus-value. On his theoretical shoulders stand such diverse contemporary Marxists as Samir Amin and Michael Taussig.

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