

C. L. R. JAMES "DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM AND THE FATE OF HUMANITY" (1947)

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James' now famous essay opens with these gripping words, "Mankind has obviously reached the end of something" (153). What this 'thing' is is implied by the bourgeoisie societies crumbling, in his view, around the world. Citing Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, he decries what he considers "systematic brutalisation and corruption" (153). James claims that bourgeoisie civilization is devoid of thought and this dearth of philosophy is as a result of the general collapse of society. Heavily influenced by Trotsky's ideas, he mentions the Hegelian concept of "contradiction" (154), an important term that will resurface throughout the essay. Development through contradiction is the root of all movement for him. This is an expression of the basic element of the dialectic, where conflicting forces clash and a synthesis emerges out of those contrary forces. James strongly believes that Marxism is a science, and in an apologetic fashion, claims that since its pronouncements are of the future, it is difficult, and even unnecessary to justify it to its ignorant opponents, who critique it as a teleological construction and religion.

James then goes on to make a distinction between bourgeoisie hypotheses and those of the Marxists. The former's laws are divided and fragmented and as a result, will eventually crumble. The latter however, is well known to its practitioners and viable, since it is based on, "the fundamental logical law in the contradictory nature of all phenomena and first of all, human society" (155). Using the various failings of his day (and maybe ours as well), he highlights its excesses and shortcomings, and then expounds on the all important second stage of dialectical materialism, the change from quantity to quality. This stage is the sudden explosion of the elements of contradiction, creating revolutions which subsequently alter the economic and social conditions of the social space in question, achieving a completion and creating an ethos where new ideas can replace the old, corrupt bourgeoisie ones. He then moves on to a nobler task, the defence of Marxism against its perceived failure in Russia.

The Russian revolution for C. L. R. James was "the most glorious episode in human history" (156), far surpassing its 'incomplete' British and French antecedents. But sadly for James and all devoted Marxists, "Capital . . . once more rules in Russia" (156). With the examples of the French and British Revolutions James introduces the force of counter-revolution, and claims this is what happened in Russia. A wide-ranging revolution by the proletariat, according to James, could only be squashed by an even more all encompassing and brutal totalitarian dictatorship, which took place in Russia under Stalin. To use a Star Trek allusion, James sees Russia as the final frontier: if the revolution fails there, then the world will descend into "counter revolution and barbarism" (158).

The inevitability of history is important for James. He goes to great lengths to defend this idea from those who oppose it, some of whom appear to be in his camp, against the charge that it is a religious and rationalist notion. Devoted Marxist as he is, James recognizes that the seemingly failed French, British, German and now the Russian revolutions could be interpreted as not adhering to Marxist pronouncements. But he blames this schism and lack of understanding on bourgeoisie philosophy. A deeper perusal of the Bolshevism borne out of Lenin and Marxist ideas reveals the scientific basis of these ideas, and thus catapults them into a space that is superior to bourgeoisie ideology.

Continuing to cite Hegel, James admonishes that to keep the revolution alive one must "hold fast the positive in its negative and the content of the presupposition in the result" (160), i.e. even in the face of the horrors of the Russian revolution the telos is around the corner; the Utopian classless society will come to pass. James uses a key concept, "the negation of negation" (161) to describe the obliteration of bourgeois society by

those who have been deprived or negated of their rights, the proletariat. This event, he claims, is the final and most important law of the dialectic.

The hypotheses of Marx, James insists, are "logical abstractions" (161) and reflect the "movement of human society" (161). The barbarism of man as evidenced in the Russian revolution is what will make his true nature surface. It will become a macrocosmic 'last straw' which will bring civilisation to its knees, a process James claims started with Christianity.

James purports that throughout history man has sought purpose of existence, with freedom and happiness being the main objective. He however contends that this existence is in no way religious, but it is through history that "the logical principle of universality contains within it a logical contradiction of abstract and concrete" (164), i.e., that although men lived within a concrete existence they also had to find something abstract to make their lives bearable. He then goes on further to state that the two opposites are interpenetrated.

So in looking at man's quest for universal totality, James believes that man would ultimately seek to destroy, move aside, "that is to negate what impedes his movement towards freedom and happiness" (164).

"Man is the subject of history the subject (man) is pure and simply negativity" (164).

So therefore because of this movement of negativity the dialectical process is given further momentum. It creates revolutionary change. He believes that revolutions hold the key to man's totality: "a revolution because it is that revolution demands all things for all man. It is an attempt to leap from the realm of objective necessity to the realm of objective freedom" (164).

He looks at Hegel's concept of mediation, which is born out of a new state that that is established after a revolution, the ideology which accompanies it, are a form of mediation between abstract and concrete, ideal and real. This usually assumes the form of state power, and the new relations that are developed by the philosophy of age.

Marx and Engels, unlike Hegel see the dialectic in a materialistic form, because it was derived not originally from religion but from the historical stages of man.

He uses Christianity as an example of this, because he believes that the early Christian revolutions that took place, initially sought to free man from that which kept a constraint on his freedom. Unfortunately with the revolution problems arose as James points out Christianity became "humanism" (168) in the form of the church. "Heaven was too abstract to satisfy completely the masses of the people" (168).

Humanism, James believes, "was the substitution of a liberal culture for the rich in place of the complete expression desired by the workers" (170), i.e. man's quest for absolute universality was further constricted by those in power. So therefore the need to breakaway would only become more insistent.

So therefore 'negation of negation' takes place. He notes that as society develops further, the more the masses "are thrown further back from universality than they had ever been" (170).

Additionally he claims that the revolutions that took place were disorganised and without proper material as aid and so failed. Other revolutions failed also not because of organisation, but because in the end much of what was fought for did not trickle down to the masses. He uses the French revolution as an example. He claims:

When the French revolution was over and men had time to think, it was seen that the revolution of reason and the mighty struggle for liberty, equality and fraternity had left men farther apart than ever before. (172)

This is where he goes back to Hegel, who he believes understood that universality for men is impossible. Only the state could embody universality for the community. Revolutions were pointless and the state was a "defence against the revolutionary masses" (172). Hegel, he believes, did not know the modern proletariat and based his theory on the

inevitability of proletarian subordination, i.e. he saw the proletariat as finding totality under the bourgeoisie state.

He agrees that Hegel may have anticipated the end of the totalitarian state and gives him credit for that and purports that his writings is instrumental in modern politics. Yet like any true Marxist, he turns Hegel on his head.

According to James, it was as impossible to go any farther along the road of Hegel as it is impossible to go farther than the totalitarian state of contemporary history that will eventually crumble. Marx had to abandon the quest for universality or find a new foundation for it. Neither Hegel nor Marx ever had any illusions about bourgeois democracy as a solution to the unappeasable desires and aspirations of men.

For Marx bourgeois democratic politics was a deception. The productive process of capitalism denied any real community to men. And democratic politics, like religion, was a form of intervention by which men gained the illusion that they were all members of one social community, an illusion of universality.

Marx and Hegel had different views of the dialectical process.

Hegel saw objective history as the successive manifestation of a world spirit. Marx placed the objective movement in the process of production. Hegel had been driven to see the perpetual quest for universality as necessarily confined to the process of knowledge. Marx reversed this and rooted the quest for universality in the need for the free and full development of all the inherent and acquired characteristics of the individual in productive and intellectual labour. Hegel had made the motive force of history the work of a few gifted individuals in whom was concentrated the social movement. Marx propounded the view that it was only when the ideas seized hold of the masses that the process of history moved. Hegel dreaded the revolt of the modern mass. Marx made the modern proletarian revolution the motive force of modern history. . . . Hegel placed the future guardianship of society in the hands of the bureaucracy. Marx saw future society as headed for ruin except under the ruler ship of the proletariat and the vanishing distinction between intellectual and manual labour. (173)

Marx believed that the proletariat must be revolutionary or they were nothing. According to Marx the proletariat will conquer or society will destroy itself. Hegel and Marx had similar pre-suppositions – the acknowledgment of the quest for universality, but Hegel believed that the bureaucracy was mediation for universality but Marx stated that this can never be a reality; this quest was embodied in the masses. James goes on to illustrate that Marxism is not a dialectical religion.

James hails Bolshevism as a supreme philosophy of life and political conception. The world was to be saved by reason but this lay not in the heads of philosophers and intellectuals, but in the actions of the masses. The world under the control of the bourgeoisie is chaotic and destructive. He saw the masses as the ones to destroy this world. "The bourgeois world is rejected completely. Only what destroys it is reasonable. But the reason of the masses was not merely destructive. It was destructive of the bourgeois world" (). James further praises the proletariat, but acknowledges that the educated ones can be corrupted by bourgeois education.

James reiterates the need for universal solution to counteract the imperialism of the Marshall plan; universality is needed across the world. He goes on to say that it was Trotsky's dream to unite the various factions of society. The real history of humanity can only surface via the dialectic.