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Dialectical Materialism and Proletarian Literature, with Introduction: Remembering Leonard Brown

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"WAR IS KIND"

VOLUME XXIX · 1994
The Syracuse University Professoriate, 1870–1960: Four Grand Masters in the Arts
By David Tatham, Professor of Fine Arts, Syracuse University

Tatham discusses four great teachers of fine arts at Syracuse University—George Fisk Comfort, Irene Sargent, Ivan Meštrović, and Sawyer Falk—whose careers reflected local manifestations of changes that occurred in the professoriate nationwide at four points in its history.

The Sculpture of Harriet Whitney Frishmuth and New York Dance
By Joseph G. Dreiss, Professor of Art History, Mary Washington College

Dreiss sketches the early career of the sculptor Harriet Whitney Frishmuth, and shows how her best work was influenced by New York dance—especially by a certain lighthearted dancer.

Dialectical Materialism and Proletarian Literature
By Leonard Brown (1904–1960)

Introduction: Remembering Leonard Brown
By John W. Crowley, Professor of English, Syracuse University

Crowley places Leonard Brown, the legendary Syracuse University English professor, in the context of his times. In the lecture that follows (probably prepared ca. 1937), Brown, with characteristic precision, interprets for a general audience the ideas of Marx and Engels.

The Moment of “Three Women Eating”: Completing the Story of You Have Seen Their Faces
By Robert L. McDonald, Assistant Professor of English, Virginia Military Institute

McDonald describes the circumstances in the lives of Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White that led to their professional collaboration in producing You Have Seen Their Faces, and how a photograph eased the way.
The Punctator's World: A Discursion (Part Eight)
By Gwen G. Robinson, Former Editor, Syracuse University Library Associates Courier
Robinson reviews the progress of punctuation between 1850 and 1900, showing how—admitting the ongoing (but increasingly sophisticated) contest between the demands of the eye and the ear, of grammar and rhetoric—writing in English reached new expressive heights in the work of Pater, Dickinson, and others.

The First Editions of Stephen Crane's The Black Riders and Other Lines and War Is Kind
By Donald Vanouse, Professor of English, The State University of New York at Oswego
Vanouse explains how a critical appreciation of two Stephen Crane first editions, which exemplify a synthesis of poetry and book design, can improve our understanding of both the times in which they appeared, and the cultural impact of Crane's verse.

Stephen Crane at Syracuse University: New Findings
By Thomas A. Gullason, Professor of English, University of Rhode Island
Gullason corrects long-accepted notions about the brief career of Stephen Crane as a Syracuse University student during 1891, and sheds new light on Crane's life during that time.

Hats, Heels, and High Ideals: The Student Dean Program at Syracuse University, 1931–1960
By Thalia M. Mulvihill, Doctoral Candidate, Cultural Foundations of Education, Syracuse University
Mulvihill tells the story of the Student Dean Program: how it started, what it was all about, and how its impact is still being felt.

News of the Syracuse University Library and of Library Associates
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Dialectical Materialism and Proletarian Literature

BY LEONARD BROWN

Introduction: Remembering Leonard Brown

BY JOHN W. CROWLEY

Leonard Brown, a legendary figure in his own time, was still well remembered in 1970, a decade after his death, when I joined the English Department at Syracuse. His former colleagues used to talk about him, some with awe, and for a while there was a poetry prize named in his honor. But times changed, senior faculty passed on, memories dimmed, and funding for the prize dried up. For a while, Brown faded from view.

He had enjoyed a long career at Syracuse. Born 31 January 1904, in Belvidere, Nebraska, Leonard Stanley Brown graduated in 1924 from Cotner College and earned his M.A. a year later from the University of Nebraska. Only twenty-one when he arrived at Syracuse in the fall of 1925, Brown remained on the faculty for nearly thirty-five years, rising to the rank of assistant professor in 1930 and, after a very long wait, to associate professor in 1955. He died in his Euclid Avenue apartment on 5 January 1960, a month shy of his fifty-sixth birthday.

Except for a year’s graduate work at the University of Chicago, Brown never pursued the doctoral degree that was to become increasingly requisite to academic advancement. Nor did he publish the scholarly articles and monographs expected of English professors at large research institutions. Although a handful of his poems, stories, and critical essays did appear, mainly in the Sewanee Review, Brown was best known in print for the trio of anthologies he

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edited: Modern Short Stories (1929), A Quarto of Modern Literature (1936), and Literature for Our Time (1947). Like all such textbooks, these counted for little as “scholarship” at the time, and they have disappeared with the pedagogical moment that produced them.

Brown devoted his career to teaching, and his enduring reputation was that of an extraordinary teacher. I was reminded of his impact in 1988, when one of his students, Arthur J. Carr, wrote to the department about obtaining a copy of his master’s thesis from 1937. It was of value to him, he explained, in part because Brown had supervised it; and in recalling the Syracuse of the late 1930s, Carr asserted that the “most remarkable member of the Department in those years was, surely, Leonard Brown.”

These sentiments were echoed a few years later, when another of Brown’s students, Karl Korstad, sent me an essay he had written about his experience as a graduate student instructor at Syracuse from 1937 to 1942. Korstad also testified to Brown’s catalytic effect and charismatic force as a mentor and intellectual exemplar:

Many of us attended his courses, sometimes more than once, for they were different each year, reflecting the thinking and evaluating he had done in the interim. . . . He was the stimulant and the guide we needed.

Leonard, like many other American intellectuals and writers in the thirties, had sought to explore the implications of the ideas of Freud, of Jung, of Darwin, of Marx, of the “functionalist” anthropologists, and of Einstein’s theory of relativity and Heisenberg’s theory of indeterminacy.

The importation of these ideas to the undergraduate classroom was Brown’s special project in those days. He instigated an innovative approach to Freshman English, one in which students were challenged with supplemental readings from Berkeley, Darwin, Marx, Freud, Einstein, and such anthropologists as Malinowski, Boas, and Mead. Korstad remembered that some instructors, with Brown’s encouragement, went as far as to teach grammar along functionalist lines: “We classified parts of speech not for what they were, but for what they did.”

This was in the fall of 1939, and the ferment continued for a
couple of years during which the freshman course was radically overhauled. Then a reaction set in as the new-fangled ideas met resistance from inside and outside the department, and the curriculum reverted to its former emphasis on grammar, rhetoric, and Western world literature. Brown was deeply discouraged by these developments. “I doubt that much we are interested in will be at all possible in education henceforth,” he gloomily wrote to Korstad, then in the wartime Army Medical Corps. “We have reached the Imperial Days when the country will button rigidly down, and one of the first things to be buttoned fast will be the educational system.”

It was during the time when many American intellectuals were marching to a Marxist drum that Brown wrote his lecture on “Dialectical Materialism and Proletarian Literature.” The piece, which dates most likely from 1937 or 1938, is reflective of the brief era of good feelings that prevailed on the political left between 1935 and 1939; that is, between the institution of the Popular Front, the softer Communist Party line meant to support alliances among anti-Fascists of all stripes, and the unexpected signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, which sowed discord and prompted an exodus from party ranks. Brown was never a member; and although he moved as far to the left as he ever would during the 1930s, he stayed fundamentally “liberal” in his suspicion of doctrinal rigidities (including those of what he called “Pseudo-Marxists”) and his commitment to the free play of conflicting ideas.

Intended for a general audience and written with pristine clarity and argumentative precision, “Dialectical Materialism and Proletarian Literature” addressed a topic once of great moment to those seeking portents of revolution in American writing of the 1930s. Brown alludes, for example, to Granville Hicks, whose Marxist literary history, *The Great Tradition* (1935), scanned the literary horizon for any sign of rising proletarian consciousness. Brown, in fact, offers nothing in the way of leftist literary cheerleading. He admires Marx and Engels less as systematic thinkers than as exponents of the same philosophical relativism that he was attempting to bring to the freshman curriculum at Syracuse.

Published here for the first time, “Dialectical Materialism and Proletarian Literature” is part of a larger collection of Leonard
Brown’s papers that will soon become available in the Syracuse University Archives. These papers, which consist mainly of syllabi, detailed course outlines, lecture notes, and other course-related material, suggest his immense devotion to teaching. Teaching is an evanescent art—a thing of words and silences, gestures and stillnesses that literally vanish (but not without a trace) into the thin air that is their medium. The fullness of a great teacher’s gift eludes capture in even the best of his writings. Such an occasional piece as “Dialectical Materialism and Proletarian Literature” certainly gives some hint of Brown’s powers of mind. But he attained his highest voltage in class, and his true legacy was the inspiration he so freely gave to his many devoted students.

Dialectical Materialism and Proletarian Literature

Since proletarian literature avows an alliance with dialectical materialism, we ought to understand the theory before attempting to evaluate the claims of the literature. And we ought to understand the theory at its source. Marx and Engels, that is, as the major apologists of dialectical materialism, ought to be asked to stand only upon what they said, rather than upon what their enthusiastic friends and enemies assert they said. Accordingly we take our first step toward an understanding of dialectical materialism by removing two misunderstandings of it that are popular or current.

Dialectical materialism is sometimes misconceived as only another of the many varieties of nineteenth-century absolute determinism. Now the postulate of determinism is simply that everything is governed by law. So far so good. But now occurs the troublesome question: If everything is governed by law, who or what is or are the governor or governors, the governing cause or causes? Who or what makes the law? Many answers have been made to this question. But any one answer will tend in one of two general directions: It will tend to say either that man has a governing part in determining how things shall go, or that he has not. The last answer, that man
Leonard Brown (ca. 1937). (Courtesy of Jacqueline Brown.)
has nothing whatever to say about his destiny, is the essentially fa­
talistic answer of the absolute determinist. But this is no answer at all. For the real question remains: If man is not, then what is the determining cause or causes? Ultimately the absolute determinist simply says, in effect, that nobody knows. That is why man is help­less, and his destiny determined.

During the nineteenth century, Marx’s century, this essentially fatalistic determinism had a great vogue, and followed two lines of development. One was explicitly pessimistic. In the unprofessional language of the average man it asserted that things were going from bad to worse and nothing could be done about it. In the symbolic language of the decadent poets it appeared as an imagery of tombs, graves, gaols and seasons in hell. In the professional language of philosophers of history, e.g. Spengler, it declared that Western Civil­ilization was moving toward annihilation, from which all man’s effort was powerless to withhold it. This was the pessimistic line of development.

Now if one can turn this pessimistic determinism upside down, deciding just as fatalistically that things are getting better rather than worse, one emerges as an optimistic determinist. This second atti­tude appeared among the world’s citizenry several years ago in the sweet guise of Couéism—“day by day in every way I am getting better and better.” It had emerged earlier in poetry, as in Browning’s “God’s in His Heaven; all’s right with the world.” Comte, Herbert Spencer and even Darwin represent this position in the realm of theory. And a good deal of our linear and evolutionary writing of history has assumed this bent, the most ambitious of re­cent examples being perhaps Sorokin’s three volume work entitled Social and Cultural Dynamics, which concludes: “The oblique ray of the sun still illumines the glory of the passing epoch. . . . Beyond it, however, the dawn of a new great . . . culture is probably waiting to greet the men of the future.” This is the optimistic line of develop­ment followed by absolute determinism during the last century.

Our purpose here is not especially to quarrel with either the pes­simistic or optimistic view as described above, but only to notice that both are merely varieties of absolute determinism, that both are essentially fatalistic. Things have gradually through the cen­
turies got better or worse, or have failed to get better or worse, in spite of everything that everybody did. If things have got better it is because of God, or some other extra-human cause; if they have got worse, it is similarly because of the devil, or another agent of evil, also extra-human. In either case we are confronted with absolute determinism; our destiny is unalterable. We have got to go on getting better or worse, suffering the whims of Thomas Hardy's President of the Immortals or the beneficence of Tennyson's "one increasing purpose," whether we like it or not.

Now dialectical materialism, as we said at the beginning, is sometimes misconceived as only the economic brand of this absolute determinism. But there are certain significant exceptions.

In the first place, Marx and Engels, as philosophers of history, never said that things are getting better, or worse; they said only that things are changing, have always changed, and will always change. They believed it was futile to talk about some inhuman abstraction known as historical change, because there is no history without people. Accordingly they preferred to discuss a particular change, the French Revolution for example. For an analysis of a particular change enabled one to decide whether it was good or bad and for whom. Consequently they were never prophetically cocksure of either a pessimistic or an optimistic future, as are respectively Spengler and Sorokin. They saw no good or bad bogey swimming down the stream of history.

In the second place, Marx and Engels contended that human history is made, not by extra-human agents—mystical, supernatural or otherwise—which are outside man's control, but by man himself. Man determines his own destiny.

In the third place, dialectical materialism was never claimed by either Marx or Engels as a blanket theory of history, that is, as an explanation of everything, past, present and future. This futile claim is the rock which wrecks most systems of absolute determinism. For absolute determinism has to begin, unavoidably, with an arbitrary assumption, a hypothesis—for example, that things are getting better or worse with time, or that history moves in cycles. Then, once this initial assumption is made, the absolute determinist is inescapably and logically committed to an explanation of history.
in terms of the hypothesis; he has to write his history to fit, for if something does not fit, the arbitrary hypothesis with which he began is obviously no good, and consequently neither is the architecture of history he has so laboriously erected upon the nonexistent foundations of his arbitrary hypothesis. Of course things can be warped to fit; the medieval Church's distortion of the classics is a case in point. But this is dangerous business, for sooner or later some enterprising soul discovers the trick, as the Revival of Learning discovered the real classics, and so demolishes the whole edifice. The cyclical systems of absolute determinism, which contend that all cultures pass through exactly the same stages and those stages in the same order, are now being destroyed by the discovery of facts that cannot be made to fit into the cyclical theory.¹

The distinction, then, between absolute determinism and dialectical materialism is that the latter does not begin with an arbitrary hypothesis that commits it to a uniform explanation of all details of history; it does not fall, in short into the fatalistic trap. "This is what has happened," says the absolute determinist; "hence, this is what will happen." "Not so," replies Marx or Engels. "This is what has happened, and this is what will happen if all conditions are right." That little "if" makes all the difference. And dialectical materialism insists that man controls the "if."

We have tried to correct the confusion of dialectical materialism with absolute determinism. We shall now try briefly to correct its confusion with mechanical materialism.

Materialism is as old as Democritus, who assured us that nothing exists save the motion of atoms in an empty void; all else is delusion. The soul itself consists of fine smooth atoms, whose motion produces the phenomena we call life. Epicurus took over this atomic doctrine and added the denial that purposive acts from without can ever interfere with the natural course of atoms. Ethics

¹. The Peruvians, for example, did not pass through the nomad and pastoral stages for the simple reason that they had no cattle. Or again, matriarchal forms of society have not always preceded patriarchal forms, as has been claimed by certain absolute determinists, because they have not done so among the tribes of British Columbia.
then became, as for some of the stoics, a problem really in physics—the good life was the life perfectly attuned to the natural dance of the atoms.

These old doctrines crop up again in the nineteenth century. By the time we reach Haeckel, he is dismissing free-will, the dualistic idea of a personal God, and the soul as delusions, and is accounting for all known phenomena—material, mental and spiritual (including consciousness)—by matter and force alone. Matter and force: this is mechanical materialism. As in an earlier materialist, Lucretius, the nature of things is what it is, and since man is part of the nature of things, he is what he is. “Let him submit in silence, then, to nature’s mandates, which nothing can alter.” (Holbach.)

Now Marx and Engels attacked this mechanical materialism because they believed that it begged, like absolute determinism, the fundamental question: Why does human history change? Or to exemplify this question in particular terms: Why did the thirteenth century, for instance, build gothic cathedrals, but the twentieth skyscrapers?

To this kind of question the mechanical materialist could only trot out his blanket answer: Matter and force. We readily grant, replied the dialectical materialist, the existence of matter and force in the thirteenth century, and their existence in the twentieth. But this tells us nothing that we want to know. What made matter and force so alter their modes of activity as to relinquish the human habits of the thirteenth century for those of the twentieth? What changes human habits? That is what we want to know. Pinned down finally in this way, the mechanical materialist could only say what the absolute determinist said: Nobody knows.

Marx and Engels’ major effort, then, was to construct a philosophy which would answer the question that neither mechanical materialism nor absolute determinism could answer. And despite the formidable sound of the phrase “dialectical materialism,” it constitutes basically a very simple answer: Human history changes because men change it. This is the first fundamental tenet of Marxism.

We have now tried to correct two misconceptions of dialectical materialism, namely, that it is on the one hand a variety of absolute determinism or on the other of mechanical materialism. Accord-
ingly, with those two systems of thought identified and out of the way, we turn to dialectical materialism itself.

II

We begin with the fundamental tenet already mentioned: Human history changes because man changes it. Why does he change it? Because certain needs, of which he becomes conscious from time to time, create in him certain desires. He then acts to satisfy his needs by fulfilling his desires. The result of his actions is historical change. Marx then moves one step further to ask the all-important question: What, what creates the human needs which lead to the human desires which lead to the human actions which change history? The basis of the historical process, it will be seen, is the unknown which first creates the human needs.

Marx identified this unknown as the economic system of ownership, production and distribution of material goods which characterizes any given society. As Engels said: “Marx discovered the simple fact that human beings must have food, drink, clothing and shelter first of all, before they can interest themselves in politics, science, art, religion and the like. This implies that the production of the immediately requisite material means of subsistence, and therewith the existing phase of development of a nation or an epoch, constitutes the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal outlooks, the artistic and even the religious ideas are built up. It implies that these latter must be explained out of the former, whereas the former have usually been explained as issuing from the latter.” From this material source, then, arise the human needs. That is why Marx called his system dialectical materialism.

But just how does an economic system create human needs? Here we must turn to an examination of the word “dialectical.”

Originally, in Greece, dialectic simply meant the process of getting at the truth through a debate carried on by opposing sides. One side concerned itself with the defense of a supposedly established thesis, and was known, I need not say, as the thesis side. The other side did its best to destroy the supposedly established thesis, and accordingly was known as the antithesis side. The two sides then clashed or debated, and from the debate finally emerged a new
conception of the truth, which resembled wholly neither the thesis nor the antithesis point of view, but rather a compromise, or, in technical terminology, a synthesis of the thesis and antithesis. This synthesis then obviously became a new and supposedly established thesis, but it immediately provoked a new antithesis, which rose to challenge it. A second debate occurred, from which emerged a still newer compromise or synthesis. This then became, in its turn, still another supposedly established thesis, provoked its own antithesis; they clashed—and so ad infinitum. Thesis-antithesis-synthesis: thesis-antithesis-synthesis:—to the end of time. This process is dialectic.

The notion of dialectic passed naturally into philosophy, and in the nineteenth century we find Marx borrowing it from Hegel and giving it a peculiarly materialistic cast. Briefly, he believed that the social process is like the logical process just described, that it is dialectical. And since he believed that the basis of society, for reasons already given, is economic or material, it followed that the economic process is necessarily dialectical.

Society, always and at any given moment, then, operates dialectically, and the fundamental area of dialectical operation is the economic or material sphere. One side of a given society, that is, will be the thesis side, the group that owns the material means of production—land, factories, or whatever it may be; this group will be primarily concerned with its own preservation and the unhampered continuation of its characteristic economic activities. But its very economic pursuits will unavoidably call into existence its antithesis, another group that has no material stake in the economic organization, does not own the material means of production, but is necessary, as workers or otherwise, to the continuance of the established economy. As the thesis or established or owning side of this society continues to expand and amplify its activities, it naturally increases the numbers and therefore the eventual strength of the antithesis group, until finally this second group, strong enough now to defy the first, emerges into the open, forcibly rebels, and wins or loses a social revolution. This is the class struggle. But win or lose, the new social order will wholly resemble neither of the older two; instead it will be a synthesis or compromise of both. This new social order now becomes the established one, the new
thesis, and will have its own peculiar economic organization. But now its economic activities in turn provoke a new antithesis, a new group of have-nots, who gradually grow in numbers, emerge into the open, forcibly rebel, etc.

Applied to particular societies, the dialectic affords analyses somewhat like the following (these are admittedly very sketchy, and are meant to be only illustrative): Land was the fundamental economic means of production in the Roman State. The Roman patrician, in order to get more land, had to dispossess, by taxation or otherwise, his weaker brother, the plebeian. The more land the patrician appropriated in this way, the greater the number of those he dispossessed. Soon there were a great many of these landless men, the Christians and others. Being many, they dared to complain, and their numbers got them a hearing. Eventually the Roman emperors were forced to recognize them and their Christianity as the state religion. When Rome, as we say, “fell,” these strongly organized rebels, the Church, having no material stake in the old society, naturally did not fall with it; they continued, struck up an alliance with the Franks under Charlemagne, and became the new thesis or established order, Christian feudalism.

Under Christian feudalism land was again the economic means of production. Accordingly the old Roman story repeated itself. Land holdings gradually became centralized in the hands of the dominant class, the Church and the feudal nobles. Dispossessed and propertyless serfs and handicraftsmen, the have-nots, grew in numbers, and finally emerged openly as burghers and traders. Eventually they rebelled against the medieval Church in the Protestant Reformation, and against the feudal nobles in the constitution of the prince, the modern monarch obedient to the House of Commons. So capitalism, the new order, the new thesis, was born.

In this new capitalistic society money displaces land as the economic focus. But as capital develops itself in an effort to make money, it has perforce to develop its antithesis, a body of propertyless men to do the work of capitalism, the proletariat or modern working-class. Capitalism cannot get along without them. But this proletariat can live only so long as it can find work, and it can find work only so long as its labor increases capital, that is, makes profits.
When capital, through failure of its markets to expand continuously, runs into depressions, shuts down its factories, refuses to make goods (for the very good reason that nobody can buy them), destroys food and plows under crops in the name of overproduction, and throws men out of work, who, be it remembered, can live only so long as they do work, restlessness and rebellion, John L. Lewis and the C.I.O. naturally occur. That is, the have-nots clearly have no interest in maintaining an economic system that behaves in the way just described, for it fails to provide them with the immediate material means of subsistence.

These are the workings of the dialectic in history.

And so we come to the immediate principles that lead directly to the proletarian writer.

We have already heard dialectical materialism contending that the economic or material is the true basis of social structures. We now turn to a second contention, namely, that upon its economic base any society will and does erect its ideological superstructures—laws, political forms, arts, religions, etc., in short, its schema of ideas and relationships. We now turn to a third contention, which is, that since the economic system does not exist in vacuo, but rather in the hands of its owners, the dominant class, those owners will naturally encourage that kind of superstructure or schema which they favor or can afford to ignore, and will discourage, forcibly if necessary, those which they do not agree with or find dangerous to their self-preservation. That is, Socrates was put to death by the state because he taught people how to call things into question. The Middle Ages built cathedrals because the Church dominated the society of the period. We build skyscrapers because business needs them. Early capitalism discouraged the use of Roman numerals and encouraged Arabic because commercial accounting found the latter more desirable. Don Quixote satirized chivalry because the growing middle-class society of his time made chivalry anachronistic. Hitler discourages all older views of Shakespeare, who now emerges in recent German scholarship as a true Aryan mystic, none other. Pennsylvania bans films of the Spanish War be-
cause Loyalist economics does not square with the economics of United States Steel. In short, the ideas, habits, customs, arts, beliefs and practices encouraged and countenanced in any society are likely to be those favored by the established or owning class of that society, and since that class is dominant only because it owns the economic means of material production, Marx and Engels could say that the ideological superstructures are reared upon the foundations of the economic substructure.

Now we add a corollary to this. Any economic system produces its disaffected, its have-nots, who wish to become the haves. What of them? They will have their ideologies too, superstructures erected upon the economic foundations not of reality but of what they hope will become reality, that is, the economic system they want. Their ideas, schema and representations will reflect, Marx contends, their economic desires. Fear of retaliation by the ruling class may lead revolutionary writers to disguise their ideas, in the innocent garments of allegory for example, but underneath the symbolism the revolutionary point of view will persist. Usually these ideologies of the have-nots are confused and chaotic, naive and crude, to begin with, because underneath them is not yet any real economic organization, only wishful thinking. They are likely, therefore, not to seem to have any material roots, or as we say, to be "grounded in reality," reality being for most of us, we should remember, what we already know. Thus the economic desires of the rebellious will naturally tend to give to their ideological work definite characteristics. The owning or ruling class, against whom they are rebelling, will tend to furnish them with villains, and their own class with heroes. The class struggle itself will furnish them plots and themes simply because that struggle seems the most important thing in the world to them; upon its outcome hangs their destiny. What could be more natural, therefore, than that they should portray it in their work?

IV

From the disaffected group in capitalistic society, consequently, have come the ideologies of our proletarian writers, most of whom, curiously, are of middle-class origins. To date only a very
little of proletarian literature has been good; most of it is very bad. In this it seems to equal bourgeois writing. But I believe it is possible to decide in a general way why some of it is bad, what its vulgar errors are. And since most of it relies, or thinks it relies, upon dialectical materialism for its analytical method, we are here forced to return to Marx and Engels for a moment.

Earlier we said that neither Marx nor Engels urged dialectical materialism as a blanket theory of history, that is, as an explanation of everything past, present and future. They insisted, rather, that history is full of accidents—fires, famines, plagues, floods, earthquakes, and especially that mysterious thing human personality—none of which can be anticipated or is anticipatable by any theory of history. Accordingly nobody but an idiot will attempt to prophesy the future lock, stock and barrel. All dialectical materialism can possibly do is to say that any given system of society will throw off its discontents, that they will multiply and eventually rebel. And here we come to the crucial point: Marxism does not say that revolutions are always won; they may be either won or lost, won as in France and Russia, lost as in Germany to Hitler. Everything depends on conditions at the time of rebellion, on leadership, material resources, strategy, etc. Now a number of earnest proletarian writers have conveniently forgotten these express stipulations of dialectical materialism, which are merely scientific caution, and have blissfully entered the old seventh heaven of the absolute determinists. They seem to believe, in other words, that some good bogey inhabits the present class struggle, that some beneficent Santa Claus will soon drop the world they desire into their stockings without their lifting a finger. Consequently they write what William Empson excellently calls, in his book Some Versions of Pastoral, the proletarian pastoral,—idyllic pictures of a proletarian Eden, sprung like Minerva from the head of Jove. Evidently there has been more of this writing done in England than in the United States. This kind of thing is what I should call one of the vulgar errors of proletarian writing. Certainly it is not based on either a true understanding of present social conditions, which supposedly is its subject matter, or on a true understanding of dialectical materialism, which supposedly is its method.
Another mistake of some proletarian writers is their very evident belief that all capitalists are villains and all workers heroes. Marx and Engels expressly warned against this error. They have a number of passages on what they call the lumpen-proletariat, that is, the scum, the dregs, the no-goods who inhabit the lower class as they do any other. The simple device of saying that a man is heroic because he is of the lower class is therefore silly. Similarly it is just as silly to say, as many proletarian writers do, that all characteristics of the proletariat are heroic characteristics. You will find any number of proletarian writers making a great point of the rough, tough and nasty worker, the hero who swears a blue streak, smashes all the windows and knows all the girls. He is the contemporary equivalent of the cheap Italianate swashbuckler who took the fancy of fifth-rate Renaissance writers, but whose pretensions were sharply satirized by competent men like Shakespeare. Or again, the proletarian writer naively assumes that since the proletariat is rebelling against capitalism, all capitalists are villains, have fat stomachs, with dollar signs embroidered on their vests, and wear silk hats. And of course all wives and daughters of capitalists are either soured on life, or have no morals and live like the beasts of the fields. This easy and false simplification of human nature is nothing new in literature; it appears whenever the writer relies on a hard and fast ethical ideology, in other words, whenever ethical values seem to be sure and unquestionable. Consequently this kind of simplification is observable in medieval literature, in the chivalric romances and the morality plays. In just this way the tenets of communism are affording the proletarian writer certain hard and fast ethical values at the present time, which enable him to simplify human nature. But this is another vulgar error, even from the point of view of dialectical materialism, as we shall see below.

Still another is the tendency of the proletarian writer to believe that there is, always has been, and always will be only one reputable subject matter for literary treatment, namely, the class struggle itself. In other words, they believe that any work not immediately and directly conditioned by the class struggle is therefore bad literature. Granville Hicks is not free from this error in his study of
American literature, *The Great Tradition*. But this is not Marxism: Marx’s own words tell us so: “... certain periods of highest development of art stand in no direct connection with the general development of society, nor with the material basis and skeleton structure of its organization.”

The last vulgar error I shall mention is the contention of some that you can’t write good literature unless you are on the revolutionary side of the class struggle. This belief is widely held; you will even find it enunciated in the work of one of the very best Marxist literary critics—Plekhanov. But do you not see that this is the old fatalistic trap of the arbitrary hypothesis again? Once you assume this, you must justify not only our contemporary proletarian writing, but also the literature of all past history. Consequently Smirnov and others have been doing their best to remodel Shakespeare, Cervantes and other great writers in the revolutionary image of their respective days, I need not say, with scant success. This futile practice resembles nothing so much as it does Hitler’s attempt to disparage Goethe as a great writer because he wasn’t an Aryan mystic.

Now my point is that these vulgar errors are the errors of pseudo-Marxists, people who either don’t understand dialectical materialism or willfully distort it. And this is unfortunate because their silly practices come to stand with the rest of us as dialectical materialism. That is why I said at the very beginning of this paper that we ought to understand this theory at its source. It is always well to remember that Marx openly avowed Aeschylus, Shakespeare and the legitimist Balzac as his favorite writers, rather than the revolutionary literati who hung onto the skirts of the 1848 revolution; that Lenin heretically preferred the work of Pushkin to that of the revolutionary poet Miakowski; that Stalin has told some of his too-earnest communist authors that they can do worse than give up their present revolutionary simplifications, and return to Shakespeare in order to learn how to write. That is, men who really understand dialectical materialism never commit these vulgar errors. All the true Marxist asks of any writer is that he be sincere, that he describe what he knows, feels and sees. If he does this the haves and have-nots, that is, the real texture of this writer’s society,
will explicitly or implicitly get into his work, as they got into Chaucer's prologue, or Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound," or Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."

In conclusion, I might add very briefly what I think is the major reason for the various misunderstandings of dialectical materialism. And I can do this best by comparing it with one of the statistical sciences known as the theory of probability. This kind of statistician deals with what he calls macro- rather than micro-magnitudes, that is, masses of fact rather than an individual fact. A life-insurance table is a good example. These tables tell us that approximately so many men will die at the age of 30, so many at 40, so many at 50, and so on; and to this end these tables are fairly accurate. But they are absolutely valueless as prophecies of when any one individual man will die. That depends entirely on data not accessible to the theorist of probability, for example accidents of all kinds. As one of these statisticians puts it: "For individuals there are no statistics. And for statistics there are no individuals." Accordingly no one but a fool would try to forecast any individual's destiny by means of a life-insurance table.

Now dialectical materialism, like these theories of probability, deals only with macro- rather than micro-magnitudes, that is, the great sweeping movements and mass changes in the social fabric. Dialectical materialism may prophesy, with fair accuracy, the revolt of the have-nots against the have, but it cannot possibly prophesy what John Doe or Richard Roe will do. Dialectical materialism may indicate that because of class interests—family, education, religion, property holding, upbringing, political affiliations, friendships, etc.—an individual will be more likely to stand on one side of the class struggle than the other, just as life-insurance tables indicate that any individual who lives to the age of six will probably live beyond ten; but this is tentative indication only, and not hard fact. Pseudo-Marxists have tried to make it hard fact. This fundamental confusion of mass-action with individual-action is the chief source, I believe, of most misunderstandings of dialectical materialism.

As my only footnote of the evening, I urge anyone, finally, who is interested either in dialectical materialism as a method of historical analysis, or in contemporary proletarian writing, to read Marx
and Engels and our contemporary writers, rather than listen to pa­pers like this. For that man is doomed who listens only to others, as Othello might tell you, if he were here.