



## **Obscurum per obscurius**

**Review of T. A. Jackson, *Dialectics***

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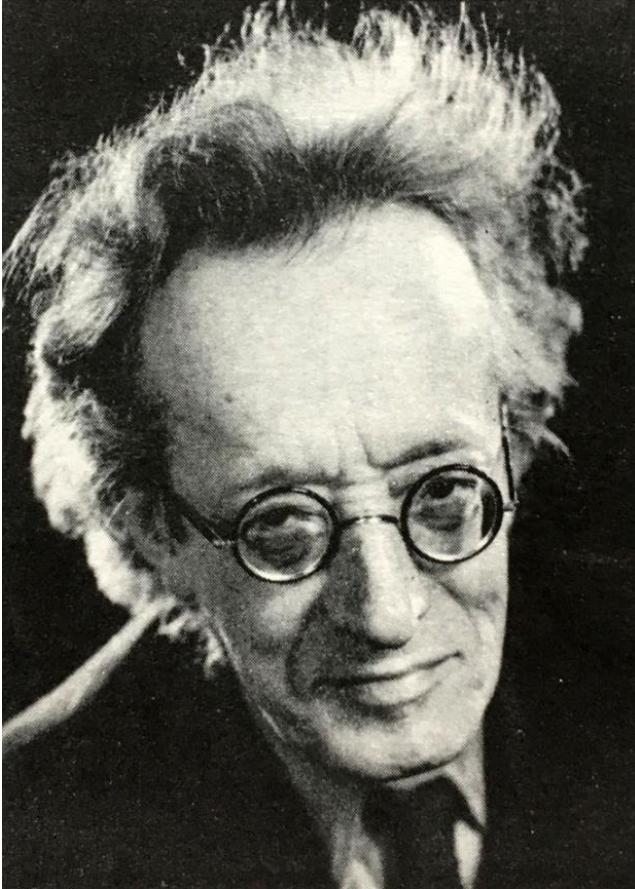
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## Obscurum per obscurius

Review of T. A. Jackson, *Dialectics: The Logic of Marxism, and Its Critics – An Essay in Exploration* (London, [1936]: Lawrence and Wishart), *Spectator* 156 (1936), 15 May, 888



THIS WORK is the longest book devoted to dialectical materialism which has yet appeared in English. The publishers say that it took two years to write, that the author put into it his whole

experience and knowledge, that he is a colourful and instructed personality, and that the misinterpreters of Marxism obtain from him ‘the familiar Jackson trouncing – a process which aids in the exposition’. The reader, himself perhaps a colourless and uninstructed personality, in need of all the help which anyone can give him in the attempt to understand the philosophy of Marx and Engels, is naturally impressed, and eagerly begins. But the blurb is far from reliable. He will find it no easy labour to make his way through the irregular maquis of Mr Jackson’s prose, and his progress is further obstructed by the size and frequency of the quotations. He will find that in themselves the quotations are excellent – chosen with care and judgement, vivid, relevant and rare; particularly interesting are those from the Paris period of the middle 1840s, from Heine, and from the recently published *German Ideology*, a document which throws valuable light on the most critical and least-known period in Marx’s youth, when he ceased to be a democratic liberal and became a revolutionary communist. But they interrupt the exposition of what in any case is a difficult and unfamiliar subject, and distract attention from the central thesis.

If the reader is not wholly uninstructed and has read Engels, he will discover that the author has ventured to add little positive matter of his own, beyond a hurried attempt to examine relativity and the quantum theory in the light of the orthodox philosophy. Engels, however, wrote with vigour and freshness, while Mr Jackson’s words move round their subject like heavily charged clouds, which dull the senses, obscure the view and occasionally explode into showers of hot abuse. But even the ‘trouncing’ lacks vitality: when Mr Jackson says that Bloomsbury (he means, however, Messrs Postgate, Cole, Murry, Macmurray, Hook, Eastman and Mensheviks generally) is guilty of ‘wretched philistine sophistries’ or, new and curious word, ‘a cacophany of clotted bosh’, these phrases, which might conceivably have been effective as the climax of an angry but cogent argument, here misfire, and serve to accentuate the strident chaos of words and phrases in which practically anything can be said and pass

unnoticed. And yet Mr Jackson is anything but empty: his six hundred pages teem with information about his subject, but the words trip and stumble over themselves and leave the reader exhausted and confused. And yet so scarce is the literature which deals with it in English that even this strange compilation is probably better than nothing. To read it may therefore be an intellectual duty; and duties, we are told, are not less binding because of the discomforts which they involve.

Why did Mr Jackson choose to write as he does? Possibly because he wished to model himself on the classical Marxist writers Plekhanov and Lenin. If so, the experiment is not a success. Plekhanov's polemical technique grew largely out of the tactical necessities of his situation. He had always been considered an exceptionally lucid, erudite and acute thinker, and became prominent early in life among the epigoni of Marx and Engels. But as a pamphleteer he revealed unique and unsuspected brilliance: he wrote in sensitive and expressive prose, full of intelligence, imagination and wit, which reminds one of Herzen a generation earlier. But it differs in the quality of its eloquence: it is not personal or romantic; its weapon is not noble indignation but calculated relentlessness, a cold and almost pedantic irony which, even when it is passionate, does not forget itself, or burst into rhetoric, or indeed raise its voice at all, but destroys the adversary with a succession of accurately aimed strokes methodically prepared beforehand – a process which is the more effective because of the poise and elegance, almost exquisiteness, with which it is accomplished.

Lenin was Plekhanov's pupil, and his similar method of attack, although much cruder and more lumbering, was no less careful and economical, and proved to be very formidable. His philosophical resources were very jejune, but he always wrote clearly, directly and forcefully. He did so because he thought clearly, directly and forcefully. His chief work on 'ideology' is drearily written, and opposes Mach and the neo-Kantians with a naive restatement of Locke's theory of knowledge in its least tenable form ('ideas' are infallible photographic images in the brain of

‘real things’ etc., which Mr Jackson confidently repeats without, evidently, being aware of the old, stock objections), but it is at any rate simple and straightforward. Having said what he wishes to say, he repeats it once or twice more loudly and emphatically, and then stops abruptly. This brusqueness has an effectiveness of its own. Further, like Plekhanov’s tracts, his book was a tactical necessity. Bogdanov and Lunacharsky were influential Socialist intellectuals who had betrayed a hankering for a curious, syncretistic brand of mysticism; since Russians have always attached real importance to abstract ideas, this heresy threatened to confuse issues and disorganise the party, and had to be suppressed at once. Lenin wrote his book, as he did everything, with an immediate practical end in view, and being a good tactician, achieved it.

These are Mr Jackson’s masters. But he serves them with blind obedience, and not only imitates their method but, with a truly boundless piety, recapitulates those errors which even that plodding hack Deborin (until his exile the official philosophical expert of the party) found too glaring to repeat in his history of philosophy: such as Lenin’s view of perception, for which Marx is certainly not responsible. This may not be important, but it is, nevertheless, embarrassing.

As for tactical considerations, one would have thought that a clear exposition and adequate defence of the fundamental theorems of Marxism would, where there is still so much ignorance, be a more effective weapon than a massacre of heretics, some of them very obscure. But all that Mr Jackson succeeds in saying is that what we do has effects on our thoughts, and vice versa; that knowledge of the external world can be gained only by being in it, of it, by coming into contact with it, and so forth – in short, by observing it and experimenting with bits of it – and, further, that everything flows and alters; that hard and fast classifications are scholastic and inadequate; that nature develops sometimes gradually but at others by leaps and bounds (this happens when quantity changes into quality; this book itself, it must be remarked, is clearly not an instance of this process);

finally, that the direction of social development is discoverable and leads to a classless society. Such of these statements as are not faded truisms require evidence, and this the author forgets to provide.

As for the metaphysical problems, they are, alas, no nearer solution or even clarification. Mr Jackson denounces metaphysics, but means by this only Hegel, solipsism or theology. He 'trounces' Postgate for saying that Marx believed in economic determinism, but only to advance as the true answer the old Hegelian commonplace that 'Freedom is the apprehension of Necessity', and explains, following Engels, that human thought is not epiphenomenal to, but an intrinsic element in, the chain of causes and effects. This does not save him from Mr Postgate, who can point out that any view is determinist which entails the proposition that in principle human history can be predicted as accurately as the behaviour of the (macroscopic) objects of the natural sciences.

If thought is itself a causal factor, then the predictory formula must not omit to take account of it, as of everything relevant. This done, history is reduced to physics. Which is all that is demanded by the most exacting determinists. And as he does regard freedom versus necessity as a real issue, he cannot, like modern positivists, say that it is not a problem at all, but a pseudo-problem, a verbal muddle. Nor can he say that whatever the state of the theoretical front, he, and he alone, is in real contact with the working masses, for when Weitling in self-defence once began to say something of this kind, Marx angrily remarked that a defective education had never yet helped any man.

But it is wrong even to suggest that the last could be the line taken by Mr Jackson: he is a theorist and has composed a book to prove this. But what he has published is only the material for it, and nothing now prevents him from writing the book itself, a clear and reasonably short defence of dialectical materialism, a book which is urgently needed. When he has done so without paying its founders the doubtful compliment of drawing all his

OBSCURUM PER OBSCURIUS

weapons from their armoury, he will have earned the attention and respect of a large and grateful public.

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