ABSTRACT
Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Ethics in the Conflict of Modernity* caps a long engagement with Marx and Marxism through a discussion of the life and work of C. L. R. James. MacIntyre’s critique of James is interesting both because James influenced MacIntyre’s early Marxism and because MacIntyre’s mature critique of Marxism can be understood against the background of his failure to realise a broadly Jamesian political project in the 1960s. Moreover, MacIntyre’s mature concept of a “utopianism of the present” can, in part, be understood as an attempt to overcome the abstract utopian limitations of the politics he embraced in his youth. I argue that MacIntyre was right to reject the interpretation of Marxism he held in the mid-1960s, but that his general criticism of Marxism is less successful because Marxism, at its strongest, can be understood as a form of a utopianism of the present. The underlying flaw with the version of Marxism that MacIntyre embraced in the 1960s is not to be found in its abstractly utopian character but rather in its one-sided conception of the relationship between working-class self-activity and socialist consciousness. This is a problem, though inverted, that continues to haunt MacIntyre’s interpretation of Marxism.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 19 June 2018
Revised 16 May 2019
Accepted 11 June 2019

KEYWORDS
Alasdair MacIntyre; C. L. R. James; utopia; alienation; Marx

Introduction

In *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (2016), Alasdair MacIntyre writes that it was from such as Vasily Grossman, Sandra Day O’Connor, C. L. R. James, and Denis Faul, “quite as much as from Aristotle, Aquinas, and Marx that I learned that to understand both the unity of political and moral enquiry and its complexity, in that its subject matter is at once philosophical, historical, and sociological” (MacIntyre 2016, xi).

In this essay I take MacIntyre’s discussion of the life and works of C. L. R. James as a lens through which to view his mature conception of utopian politics. James, whose Aristotelian Marxism is discussed elsewhere in this volume by Neil Lazarus, made an important contribution to the resolution of the post-war crisis of Trotskyism. This was an important juncture in the history of Marxism, and James’s contribution to these debates helped renew a powerful, ethical interpretation of Marxism that profoundly influenced MacIntyre’s early thought. I suggest that MacIntyre’s mature critique of Marxism can be understood in relation to the failure of his attempt to realise a broadly Jamesian political
project in the 1960s. Moreover, MacIntyre’s mature concept of a “utopianism of the present” can, in part, be understood as an attempt to overcome what he came to understand as the abstract utopian limitations of Marxism. I argue that though he was right to see fundamental weaknesses with the interpretation of Marxism he embraced in the mid-1960s, his criticism of Marxist “utopianism of the future” is not as secure as he supposes because Marxist politics, most powerfully conceived, includes what Ernst Bloch calls a concrete utopian element. This concrete utopian aspect of Marxist politics has close affinities with MacIntyre’s utopianism of the present, and suggests that MacIntyre’s attempt to realise a Jamesian version of Marxism in the 1960s failed for reasons other than that Marxism is an abstractly utopian project. The real flaw with MacIntyre’s youthful Marxism, and in this sense his thought was certainly influenced by James, stemmed from its weak conception of the relationship between working-class consciousness and working-class practice. I suggest that for Marxism to succeed as a concretely utopian project it requires a more dialectical understanding of this relationship than is evident in either James’s Marxism, MacIntyre’s early Marxism, or MacIntyre’s mature critique of Marxism. I also argue that while Marx’s concrete utopian politics has a close affinity to MacIntyre’s utopianism of the present, MacIntyreans would do well to learn from this Marxist concept because it points to a more powerful synthesis of the social and natural aspects of a properly historical-humanist ethics than is to be found in MacIntyre’s mature work.

**James, Virtues and Marxism**

Commenting on James’s semi-autobiographical history of cricket, *Beyond a Boundary* ([1963] 2005), MacIntyre claims the Trotskyist version of Marxism that James embraced in the 1930s was “alien” to the virtues that he had imbued as a black middle-class child of Puritan parents in Trinidad where he was taught to love both of the classics of English literature and, most especially, the game and associated ethics of cricket (MacIntyre 2016, 293). In a letter written to a friend as he finished the first draft of *Beyond a Boundary*, James noted that this upbringing made him feel in some ways more English than the English.

> My theme is my upbringing with English literature, cricket and puritanism. These are the three fundamental characteristics of English middle-class society. I shall show first of all that, precisely because they were not native to the West Indies, they assumed a reality for me that placed me in violent contrast with the people among whom I lived. . . . I show the interconnections between these three to show how British the literature, the cricket and puritanism are. By cricket I mean not only the game but the code connected with it. (“It is not cricket” is a very serious business and not a joke). (James quoted in Høgsbjerg 2018, 53)

It is easy to infer a contradiction between the revolutionary Marxism James embraced in the 1930s and the virtues associated with the classics of English literature and the game of cricket as reproduced through a local variant of the English public-school system and fostered by the Puritanism of his own family. James recognised a tension between these two worldviews. He suggested that there were two Jameses in his youth; the natural rebel on the one side and the true believer in the rules of the game on the other (James 2005, 36). Nevertheless, though this tension is real, it is not too big a stretch of the imagination.
to envision moving from the virtues of truth, justice and fair play learnt on the cricket field to a radical critique of colonialism and exploitation. Indeed, this is exactly the direction of James’s thought prior to leaving Trinidad when his “hitherto vague ideas of freedom crystallised around” the conviction that the West Indians “should be free to govern ourselves” (James 2005, 152).

In fact, James’s involvement with a labour led movement for West Indian self-government acted to deepen the social content of the virtues he learnt in his youth, and this process of deepening accelerated once he arrived in England in 1932. It was here, in Nelson, Lancashire that he debated politics with a professional cricket playing acquaintance from home, Learie Constantine, in the context of a local labour movement that was notably red: Nelson was one of the many “little Moscows” that dotted the British Isles at the time (James 2005, 146–153).

Over the next few months the abstract socialism James had learned from books in Trinidad became increasingly concrete through his engagement with Nelson’s “humorously cynical working men” (James 2005, 157). This social context informed his ability to fully understand the creativity of the working class in movement as detailed in Trotsky’s supremely powerful History of the Russian Revolution—a book he was subsequently to describe as “the greatest history book ever written . . . the climax of two thousand years of European writing and study of history” (James 1994, 118). James became a Trotskyist after reading Trotsky’s History, and it was at this moment that his anti-colonialism merged with his socialism into a vibrant Marxism whose first fruit, World Revolution ([1937] 2017), was a Trotskyist history of the Communist International, followed by the classic The Black Jacobins ([1938] 2001), a superb history of the slave revolt in Saint Domingue in the 1790s that ranks alongside Trotsky’s History as a high-water mark of Marxist historiography.

That James as a Trotskyist was still very much a product of his youth is evident in a culture clash he describes after leaving England for America in 1938. James’s study of cricket was in many ways a product of his 15 year stay in the USA. For it was in America that he felt most English. His sense of Englishness is particularly evident at a moment when he discovered himself shocked by the cynical approach to life espoused by his American comrades. Upon hearing of a basketball scandal where a local team had “played for results arranged beforehand, in return for money from bookmakers,” James could not comprehend his friends’ belief that the basketball team only erred in being caught not in cheating. James’s converse defence of the ethics of “cricket” reflected more than a local difference of opinion about the rules of sport. He believed that whereas his conception of loyalty had been forged on the cricket fields of his youth, the cynical attitude to sport he found in America expressed broader problems with the moral implications of the local form of egoistic individualism reflected in movies such as Rebel without a Cause (James 2005, 57–61).

If he supposed the cynical attitude of his American comrades to sport reflected deeper problems with American culture, he was equally critical of Trotsky’s dismissive attitude to sport as something that merely “deflected” workers from politics. This perspective, he argued, betrayed a one-sided understanding of working-class life. James believed that by trivialising sport this approach misunderstood the connection between its virtues of truth, justice, and fair play and the democratic culture of the modern working-class movement (James 2005, 200).
According to James, modern sport emerged in the nineteenth century alongside the movement for democracy as a novel and deepening realisation of a universal aesthetic need. Indeed, he insisted that cricket emerged as the artistic expression of artisan life, and it took from this way of life the ethics of fair play (James 2005, 210, 259, 277–279). Though, as I have argued elsewhere this history is somewhat misconceived (Blackledge 2001, 2014b), it is not difficult to divine how the ideology of fair play could be extended to criticise the racist, sexist and class divided nature of actually existing sport. This latter path is essentially the route taken by James as he embraced Marxism. Indeed, his criticisms of Trotsky’s understanding of sport suggest that so far from being alien to the virtues of his youth as MacIntyre claims, James’s Trotskyism is best understood as a moment in the process where these virtues were deepened through his involvement with the labour movement and the Marxist left. Thus it was, as Rosengarten points out, that the virtues of his upbringing segued so easily into his Marxism (Rosengarten 2007, 16).

The Crisis of Trotskyism

If the Trotskyism James embraced in the 1930s is best understood, contra MacIntyre, as an organic enhancement of the virtuous tradition in which he was raised, James’s subsequent contribution to the post-war crisis of Trotskyism is best understood in terms of the further deepening of this tradition in relation to Marx’s idea of socialism as emerging through working-class self-emancipation. What is more, in deepening this tradition James suggests important questions of the broader critique of Marxism outlined in After Virtue (MacIntyre [1981] 2007), where MacIntyre argues that a “Marxist who took Trotsky’s last writings with great seriousness would be forced into a pessimism quite alien to the Marxist tradition, and in becoming a pessimist he would in an important way have ceased to be a Marxist” (262).

The claim that a Trotskyist who took Trotsky’s Marxism seriously would be forced to break with the Marxist tradition is neither without foundation nor import. Because Trotsky stood as the living embodiment of the Marxist alternative to Stalinism, to suggest that his critique of Stalinism was a failure would at the very least pose fundamental questions of Marxism as a democratic and liberating political project. Trotsky claimed that Stalinism represented the single greatest disaster to befall the international labour movement. And Stalin’s influence was made worse because he debased the language of Marxism by dressing counter-revolution (or at least Thermidorean reaction) as revolutionary continuity (Trotsky [1936] 1972).

That Trotsky was right to claim that Stalinism marked a fundamental breach with the Marxist tradition is supported by Herbert Marcuse’s exploration of the fundamental turning point in the history of the Russian Revolution around 1923. Whereas “during the Revolution, it became apparent to what degree Lenin had succeeded in basing his strategy on the actual class interests and aspirations of the workers and peasants . . . from 1923 on, the decisions of the leadership have been increasingly dissociated from the class interests of the proletariat.” Soviet Marxism subsequently served not as a guide to working class action as it had in 1917, but as a justification for the actions already taken by the Soviet ruling class (Marcuse 1958, 124).

Against the backdrop of Stalin’s literal decapitation of the Marxist left, Trotsky risked and eventually lost his life in his attempt to arm “a new generation with the revolutionary
method over the heads of the leaders of the Second and Third Internationals.” Comment-
ing on this role, in 1935 Trotsky wrote “the work I am engaged in now . . . is the most
important work of my life—more important than 1917, more important than the period
of the Civil War or any other” (Trotsky 1958, 53–54). That James believed this statement
to be broadly true can be inferred from his claim that while Trotsky had, during the period
1917–1923, “played a great role in the history of our times,” after Lenin’s death he “was the
greatest head of our times” (James 1994, 93).

Nonetheless, despite the power and importance of Trotsky’s ongoing contribution to
the development of Marxism in the 1930s, he made a number of predictions about the pro-
spects both for Stalinism and Western capitalism that were falsified during and after the
Second World War, and that by being falsified engendered a profound crisis within the
international Trotskyist movement after his death (Blackledge 2006, 54). The pessimistic
reading of Trotsky’s legacy in After Virtue effectively equates the inability of orthodox
Trotskyism to extricate itself from this crisis with a broader failure of Marxism as a theory
of proletarian revolution. In Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity, by contrast, MacIntyre
admits what he once took to be fundamental: that the crisis of Marxism need not follow
from the crisis of Trotskyism because James (amongst others) showed that the “Trotsky-
ism of the 1930s was defective by the standards of Marxist theory rightly understood”
(MacIntyre 2016, 280; 2008d).

Unfortunately, MacIntyre does not explore the implications for his earlier criticisms
of Marxism of this important claim. If, however, there is a Marxist solution to the crisis
of Trotskyism as James’s work suggests, MacIntyre’s critique of Marxism is less secure
than he has suggested at numerous times throughout his work. This is because a sol-
tion to the crisis of Trotskyism implies that Marxism can be possibly reconnected to,
and honestly express, the democratic practices of working-class struggle as it had
around 1917.

**MacIntyre’s Marx**

According to MacIntyre, Marx’s relevance to contemporary ethical thought stems, in large
part, from the way his work illuminates the moment when Aristotelian ethics was dis-
placed from its position of pre-eminence in the West. MacIntyre claims that the funda-
mental importance of Aristotle’s contribution to ethical theory is rooted in his
articulation of the questions rational agents are compelled to confront as they seek to
live their lives in the best possible way: “What is my good qua member of a household,
qua citizen, qua human being? What qualities of mind and character do I need to identify
and order these goods correctly in my everyday practice so that I may function well as a
human being?” (MacIntyre 2016, 86). Aquinas added to this approach a concern for the
way “plain persons” might “question the actions of those with authority and power” (89)
by relating positive laws of particular societies to the natural law. If this system proved to
be incredibly effective as a guide to action in the medieval period, the inability of sub-
sequent generations of Aristotelians and Thomists either to make adequate sense of, or
to counter, the overthrow of their worldview at the shift from the medieval to the modern
periods betrays a theoretical weakness that neo-Aristotelianism must overcome if it is to
recover from this defeat. MacIntyre argues that neo-Aristotelians need to learn from Marx
because his conception of surplus value revealed the essence of the capitalist mode of
production while his account of “how individuals must think of themselves and of their social relationships, if they are to act as capitalism requires them to act” explained “why in capitalist societies individuals systematically misunderstand themselves and their social relationships” (96).

MacIntyre’s critique of Marx’s politics is in effect an extension of this argument. As he wrote in “The Theses on Feuerbach: A Road not Taken,” though workers may have embodied in their practice a revolutionary ethics of emancipation at certain moments in history, the process of proletarianisation confounded Marx’s hopes for the working class by simultaneously making resistance a necessary part of their lives while robbing this resistance of its emancipatory potential. Proletarianisation “tends to deprive workers of those forms of practice through which they can discover conceptions of a good and of virtues adequate to the moral needs of resistance” (MacIntyre 1998, 232). One consequence of this situation, or so MacIntyre claims, is that Marxism has become utopian in the traditional unworlly sense of the term. This development informed two distinct tendencies within Marxism. By creating an unbridgeable gul between the real working class and the abstract idealised image of this class as it exists within Marxist theory, the “moral impoverishment” of the working class means that Marxist theory has tended to produce its “own versions of the Ubermensch: Lukács’s ideal proletarian, Leninism’s ideal revolutionary” (MacIntyre 2007, 262). Conversely, even when led by well-meaning individuals, when nominally Marxist parties win or seriously challenge for power, they tend to reproduce all the failings of mainstream capitalist parties because they are not rooted in a politically conscious revolutionary class: “as Marxists organize and move toward power they always do and have become Weberians in substance, even if they remain Marxists in rhetoric” (MacIntyre 2007, 109).

James’s critique of orthodox Trotskyism is relevant to MacIntyre’s mature ethics because it powerfully challenges this interpretation of Marxism. In the 1940s James and his co-thinkers read Marx’s 1844 “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” with a view to extricating themselves from the post-war crisis of Trotskyism. A key moment in this process was James’s critique of Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism. Whereas Trotsky defined the Soviet Union as a workers’ state on the basis of the dominance within the economy of nationalised property, James argued that the form of property was far less important to Marx’s thought than were underlying social relations. In 1844, Marx had insisted that alienation was not a consequence of the existence of private property, but rather that private property (capitalism) was a consequence of alienated (wage) labour (Marx 1975b, 274–278). A century later, James extended this argument to claim that beneath its façade as a socialist state, the Soviet Union was in fact a state capitalist social formation characterised by generalised alienated labour. Indeed, he insisted that alienated labour had reached its apogee in Russia: “where in modern society is there so perfect an example of alienated labour and its consequences as in Stalinist Russia?” (James 1946; 1986, 28; Blackledge 2014a, 713).

The ethical implications of Marx’s theory of alienation are well known. Richard Miller points out that it recalls Aristotle’s “description of deprivations which . . . would deny people a good life” (Miller 1989, 178). Marx draws positive ethical conclusions from this negative critique of capitalism: the existence of alienation is to be taken as “a mistake, a defect, which ought not to be,” while the alternative to alienation is “free conscious activity” (Marx 1975b, 346, 276). Alienation ought not to be because it both undermines
human flourishing while simultaneously acting to obscure the good life as an alternative to the existing condition of moral impoverishment. Marxism’s categorical imperative is consequently to struggle to free humanity from the power of alien relations.

More concretely, the good as it is conceived by Marx is inherently social. For instance, in an early essay on James Mill (originally thought to precede Marx’s “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” but now thought to follow and deepen its argument), Marx imagines a non-alienated alternative to the present state of things:

Let us suppose that we had carried out production as human beings. Each of us would have in two ways affirmed himself and the other person. 1) In my production I would have objectified my individuality, its specific character, and therefore enjoyed not only an individual manifestation of my life during the activity, but also when looking at the object I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be objective, visible to the senses and hence a power beyond all doubt. 2) In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have the direct enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a human need by my work, that is, of having objectified man’s essential nature, and of having thus created an object corresponding to the need of another man’s essential nature. 3) I would have been for you the mediator between you and the species, and therefore would become recognised and felt by you yourself as a completion of your own essential nature and as a necessary part of yourself, and consequently would know myself to be confirmed both in your thought and your love. 4) In the individual expression of my life I would have directly created your expression of your life, and therefore in my individual activity I would have directly confirmed and realised my true nature, my human nature, my communal nature. Our products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature. This relationship would moreover be reciprocal; what occurs on my side has also to occur on yours. (Marx [1844] 1975a, 227–228)

Though it may be regretted that Marx did not further develop this discussion of the good life as one in which individuals realise their essence by reciprocally producing to meet each-other’s needs, this does not mean that MacIntyre is right to claim that this under-developed model is in fact “defective” (MacIntyre 2016, 280–281). According to MacIntyre, though “Marx had identified . . . those barriers to human flourishing, to the achievement of human goods, that are presented by capitalist economies,” and while later Marxists had added “an identification of the barriers to such flourishing that were characteristic of nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism,” what neither Marx nor the Marxists had adequately addressed was the problem of how they should address someone who had made a “satisfactory life for her or himself and for her or his family within the social order of capitalism and imperialism” (MacIntyre 2016, 282).

This claim can usefully be addressed through the lens of a political problem MacIntyre confronted as a Marxist militant in the 1960s: How to conceive socialist political practice in a world of alienated, yet seemingly content, individuals? As I have argued elsewhere, MacIntyre’s break with Marxism was at least partly predicated on his inability to conceptualise a political answer to this problem (Blackledge 2005, 717; 2008). His subsequent critique of Marxism amounts to a reification of this problem: Marx failed to conceptualise the common good because common goods cannot be conceptualised on the basis of alienated labour. From this perspective, the Marxist project of combining various struggles of alienated labour into a broader movement for socialism was fundamentally misconceived.
However, a tension appears within MacIntyre’s thought in relation to this issue. The discussion of the ethical implications of proletarianisation within “The Theses on Feuerbach: A Road not Taken” is unequivocally negative—the mode of life of the English and Silesian weavers was not proletarian but involved the rejection of the standpoint of civil society from the doomed perspective of “independent small producers, exchanging their products without the distortions of masters and middlemen” (Thompson quoted in MacIntyre 1998, 231–232). Nonetheless, as I have noted elsewhere, MacIntyre is honest enough to register the existence of strong eddies against the alienating current of proletarianisation (Blackledge 2009). Thus, in Dependent Rational Animals he notes how nineteenth and twentieth century Welsh mining communities were sustained by, among other “virtues,” those of “trade union struggle” (MacIntyre 1999, 143).

In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, Kelvin Knight comments that “alienation is real, but seldom...total... Insofar as individuals are not alienated...they have resources to resist their further alienation” (Knight 2007, 150). While it is true that individuals have the resources to resist alienation, Knight is mistaken in thinking that these forms of resistance exist only insofar as these individuals are not alienated. In fact, because capitalism is best understood as a totalising system of alienation through the domination of the value form, it makes little sense to talk of partial alienation except in the case of social systems on the fringes of capitalism as they begin the process of becoming locked into the law of value. Indeed, the claim that some aspects of our lives are not alienated within modern capitalist societies is a category error. Capitalism is an alienated system, and all aspects of our lives are alienated within it (Blackledge 2014b, 2017). To thus register, as MacIntyre does in Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity (MacIntyre 2016, 97), at least the partial truth of the Marxist account of the emergence of working-class consciousness, is to register that alienated individuals can from their position within a system of alienation engage in modes of struggle that challenge alienation, and in this case that they can challenge it in a way that sometimes fosters the emergence of a conception of the good life through the reproduction of socialist class consciousness within capitalism. Such consciousness, however muted, amounts to a challenge to the alienated standpoint of civil society from within the alienated standpoint of civil society.

**Challenging Alienation**

This important point raises the question of the nature of struggles that might arise within and against alienation. Though we are alienated from the social relations we reproduce as we engage in capitalist social production to meet our needs, we are also partially constituted through these social relations. And because our essence as social creatures is historical, the form taken by freedom as the goal of struggles against alienation is equally historical. Alienated social relations constitute the social basis for the concrete form of freedom towards which struggles against alienation aim. Sean Sayers points out that Marx’s theory of history starts “from an initial condition of immediacy and simple unity” before going through a period of alienation that culminates “in a higher form of unity, a mediated and concrete unity which includes difference within it” (Sayers 2011, 82). This argument underpins Marx’s claim that alienation, contra MacIntyre’s interpretation of this concept, has “not only a negative but also a positive significance” (Marx [1844] 1975b, 334). Sayers comments:
Alienation does not involve the pure negation of human possibilities in the way that the moral interpretation implies. On the contrary, a stage of division and alienation is an essential part of the process of human development. It represents the beginning of the process of emancipation through which human beings are gradually freed from a condition of natural immediacy and develop self-consciousness and freedom. Alienated labour and alienated social relations play an essential role in this process. (Sayers 2011, 84)

If alienation fragments and divides humanity into atomised egoists, it also creates the social relations through which were constituted, for instance, the nineteenth and twentieth century Welsh mining communities that reproduced virtuous alternatives to egoistic individuality (Blackledge 2009, 2010). This aspect of alienation is the basis for a response to MacIntyre’s charge that Marxism suffers from an ethical defect. According to MacIntyre, because Marx condemned abstract moralism he could not appeal to “benevolence or generosity” when confronted with the problem of a person who believes they have made a “satisfactory life for her or himself and for her or his family within the social order of capitalism and imperialism.” Neither could he, for obvious reasons, appeal to the contented person’s self-interest. Consequently, Marxists “presuppose some crude variant of Benthamite utilitarianism, according to which agents will secure their own well-being by acting so as to bring about the greatest happiness of the greatest number,” but because “Marx had rejected Bentham’s philosophy . . . Marxists tended to fall silent or to change the question” (MacIntyre 2016, 282).

MacIntyre’s use of the word “presuppose” in this argument covers a multitude of sins. It may be true that some Marxists on some occasions might have presupposed something like a Benthamite justification for their actions, but this is certainly neither universally true nor is it true of the most sophisticated versions of Marxism. In fact, even those Marxists who failed to make explicit the ethical grounds for their actions can be interpreted as having implicit grounds that escape the parameters of MacIntyre’s critique.

Marxists have had little problem conceptualising their relationship to individuals who are seemingly content with their situation in capitalist societies. To put the matter crudely, both Marx and later Marxists have divided this group into two. As MacIntyre recognised as long ago as 1953, following the famous argument first outlined in “The Holy Family,” Marxists have treated those members of the capitalist class and its penumbra who feel at home in the system of alienation as the class enemy whose individual interests contradict the universal human interest (MacIntyre 1953, 60). Because it is hopeless to appeal to the benevolence of these groups as part of the struggle for socialism Marx called the moralism which appealed to their imagined benevolence “impotence in action” (Marx and Engels [1845] 1975, 201). Conversely, those workers and members of other classes who have an objective interest in the triumph of socialism but who seem content with their lot are seen as potential agents of revolutionary change dependent upon changes to the objective conditions of their lives. In the meantime, Marxists orientate to those sections of the exploited classes and oppressed groups who have in one way or another come into conflict with the system of alienation. In orientating towards these groups in struggle, Marxists have striven to link the specific struggles of these groups to the broader struggle against capitalist alienation. This project tends to be more or less difficult as social movements ebb and flow. Moreover, though it is an infinitely difficult task that requires revolutionary phronesis to relate to a multiplicity of different movements of different sizes and different levels of militancy, in broad terms the Marxist approach to politics can easily be stated.
Commenting on the opportunistic tendency to reduce social movements to their immediate aims without relating them to the broader struggle against alienation, Engels wrote:

The forgetting of the great, the principal considerations for the momentary interests of the day, this struggling and striving for the success of the moment regardless of later consequences, this sacrifice of the future of the movement for its present, may be “honestly” meant, but it is and remains opportunism, and “honest” opportunism is perhaps the most dangerous of all! (Engels [1891] 1990, 227)

This general approach to revolutionary politics prefigured Lenin’s orientation towards what Lukács called the “actuality of the revolution” (Lukács [1924] 1970, 9–13; Blackledge 2019b): it is “only by constantly having the “ultimate aim” in view, only by appraising every step of the “movement” and every reform from the point of view of the general revolutionary struggle, is it possible to guard the movement against false steps and shameful mistakes” (Lenin 1961a, 74).

Of course, if we follow MacIntyre in dismissing the revolutionary potential of the working class, it is easy to dismiss this project as a “Nietzschean fantasy” (MacIntyre 2007, 262). More specifically, the future orientation of both Engels’s and Lenin’s strategic pronouncements can be interpreted as justifying Stalin’s “jam tomorrow” utopianism. And there is a sense in which MacIntyre’s mature critique of Marxism can be understood as a generalisation of his earlier criticisms of Stalinist consequentialism (MacIntyre 2008a, 46–47). He differentiates his mature thought from this type of utopianism thus:

[the] Utopianism of those who force Aristotelian questions upon the social order is a Utopianism of the present, not a Utopianism of the future. Utopianisms of the future have been and are misleading and corrupting, because they are always apt to and almost invariably do result in a sacrifice of the present to some imaginary glorious future, one to be brought about by the sacrifice of the present. But the present is what we are and have and a refusal to sacrifice it has to be accompanied by an insistence that the range of present possibilities is always far greater than the established order is able to allow for. We need therefore to acquire a transformative political imagination, one that opens up opportunities for people to do kinds of things that they hitherto had not believed that they were capable of doing. (MacIntyre 2008e, 16–17; 1990, 234–235; 1999, 145; 2006, 63)

While this is a powerful critique of utopianism of the future, it need not affect Marx’s Marxism for two related reasons. First, as MacIntyre recognises, “Stalinism was in crucial respects at odds with the Marxism of Lenin, let alone with that of Marx and Engels” (MacIntyre 2016, 245). Second, Marx, Engels, and Lenin had a dialectical understanding of their ultimate goals which cannot be subsumed into Stalin’s distortion of their thought. Ernst Bloch has powerfully argued that the ultimate political aims to which Marxists orientate themselves are best conceived not as a utopia of the future but as lessons generalised from and immanent to workers’ struggles from below. Conceived thus, Marxism is not the ideology of a would-be Übermensch imposing his ideology on reality, but a “concrete utopia”: a truly human potential inherent in reality (Bloch 1986; Blackledge 2012, 132–134). According to Bloch, Lenin’s realism consisted in his ability to root his politics in these immanent tendencies: “There is no realism worthy of the name if it abstracts from this strongest element in reality, as an unfinished reality” (Bloch 1986, vol. 2, 619–624). Understood in these terms, there is a unity between means and ends in the struggle for socialism.
The Limits of Jamesian Marxism

In the 1960s, James’s influence on MacIntyre informed his embrace of a variant of this ethical Marxism. As part of his critique of Trotsky, James reaffirmed Marx’s argument that socialism could only come through the “self-emancipation of the working class,” and in a somewhat idiosyncratic return to Lenin, he argued that the world had become ripe for the realisation of this vision of socialism as reiterated and deepened in Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*, because the working class had been so radically transformed since Lenin’s day that most of what Lenin had said on the role of the vanguard party had become obsolete (James, Lee, and Castoriadis [1958] 2005, 92). So, whereas Lenin had made a sharp delineation between party and class as the basis for political intervention by the party within the class struggle, James, in his *Notes on Dialectics* ([1948] 1980), argued that the “free activity” of the working class “means the end of capitalism” and the growth of this free activity meant the “contradiction” between party and class is “on the way to vanishing,” and in England and America “it will be impossible to distinguish the revolutionary party from organised labour” (James 1980, 118–119). Extending this argument in *Facing Reality* (James, Lee, and Castoriadis 2005), James and his co-authors, Grace Lee Boggs and Cornelius Castoriadis, wrote, “It is from the growing realisation that society faces total collapse that has arisen the determination of American workers to take control of total production away from the capitalists and into their own hands” (James, Lee, and Castoriadis 2005, 31; MacIntyre 2016, 293–294).

MacIntyre’s Marxism, while not identical with James’s, very much paralleled this perspective in the mid-1960s. For instance, in MacIntyre’s very un-Leninist defence of Leninist politics, “Freedom and Revolution,” he combines a formal defence of building a vanguard socialist party with an almost complete silence on the activities Lenin saw as being fundamental to political organisation: how it might relate to a working-class movement characterised by a contradictory consciousness (MacIntyre 2008b; Blackledge 2007a, 2007b). MacIntyre outlined his answer to this problem a couple of years later in “Rejoinder to Left Reformism.” In this essay he argued that reformism was part of the social life that reformists attempt to describe, and that “the reformist mode is one in which the self-activity of the working-class is necessarily minimised.” Conversely, “the self-activity of the working-class is revolutionary for it marks a total break with both the economic and the political systems of capitalism which rely upon the passive acceptance of their alienated role by the workers. And socialism is self-activity as a total form of life” (MacIntyre 2008c, 191).

By equating workers’ self-activity with socialism both James and the young MacIntyre securely positioned socialism as an immanent tendency within capitalism. However, they did so at the expense of an adequate model of the relationship between practice and consciousness within the working class. 1960s Britain can in part be characterised through the unity of a high level of industrial militancy with a widespread reformist consciousness amongst the working class. MacIntyre’s break with Marxism can be understood as a response to this situation: his immanent model of socialism as workers’ self-activity seemed not to fit the “morally impoverished” reality of working-class life. Conversely, the textbook interpretation of Lenin’s thought, according to which workers could not escape the parameters of reformism through their own resources but that socialist
consciousness was to come to them from without, appeared the more realistic perspective—if one that was ethically indefensible.

The textbooks on Lenin, however, are wrong (Lih 2006, 13). Though Lenin stressed the spontaneous tendency for bourgeois ideologies, including reformism, to be reproduced within the working class, he was just as aware that there was an equally spontaneous tendency towards socialism within the workers’ movement: “The working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism; nevertheless, most widespread (and continuously and diversely revived) bourgeois ideology spontaneously imposes itself upon the working class to a still greater degree” (Lenin 1961b, 386; Blackledge 2018, 2019a). Compared with either MacIntyre’s Marxism or his subsequent critique of Marxism this model includes a more dialectical account of the relationship between militancy and consciousness within the working class. One consequence of this account of the contradictory nature of working-class consciousness is that, through it we can reconceive Marxism as an ethical practice. For like James and MacIntyre, Lenin insisted that an adequate conception of socialist politics must be rooted in the spontaneous movement of workers against capitalism. If this is the immanent basis for the unity of means and ends as a concrete utopia in his thought, he nonetheless insisted that revolutionary politics cannot be reduced to this movement because reformism too is spontaneously reproduced within the working class (Blackledge 2018).

Interestingly, Mike Kidron, the co-editor with MacIntyre of International Socialism when it published “Rejoinder to Left Reformism,” responded to MacIntyre’s piece with an argument that built on Lenin’s analysis of the relationship between spontaneity and consciousness. Kidron countered MacIntyre’s Jamesian claim that “the self-activity of the working-class is revolutionary” with the argument that, while self-activity might immanently challenge alienated social relations, it would be a mistake to conflate the potentiality of this tendency with its realisation. In his aptly titled “Reform and Revolution,” Kidron claimed that workers through their militant strike activity were becoming “do-it-yourself” reformists. Because this contradictory unity of self-activity and reformism was an unstable whole, Kidron build upon Lenin’s insights to suggest a conception of political intervention that was rooted in the tension between the revolutionary potential immanent to working-class self-activity and the actual reformist consciousness of the working class (Kidron 1962).

From a similar standpoint, Gramsci penned the most philosophically sophisticated account of the social basis for Leninist politics. Commenting on the tensions between the dominant ideology on the one hand and the good sense learned from working-class struggles on the other, Gramsci wrote:

The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless involves understanding the world insofar as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in contradiction to his activity. One might say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and absorbed uncritically. (Gramsci 1971, 333)

The existence of good sense across the working class is the rational core of the optimism of James’s (and MacIntyre’s youthful) Marxism. Nonetheless, the hegemony of the ruling
ideas and the manner in which this hegemony is embedded in consciousness through a combination with good sense to underpin an incoherent common sense, suggests that while socialist politics can be rooted in the real movement from below it cannot be reduced to this movement. There must also be, and this is the essence of Lenin’s conception of the vanguard party, a tension between Marxism and the workers’ movement (Harman 2005).

Like MacIntyre’s claim that virtuous men and women “have to live against the cultural grain” (MacIntyre 2016, 238), Lenin’s politics is rooted in the tension between alienation and those practices through which alienation is challenged and mediated. Since the 1960s MacIntyre has, insofar as he has made general pronouncements on the subject, refused to accept that working-class struggle can generate such virtuous forms of opposition to the dominant culture. So, whereas in 1965 he signalled his embrace of a variant of James’s conception of the vanguard party, a tension between Marxism and the workers’ movement (Harman 2005), within a couple of years he had come to despair of the viability of the Marxist project. He argued that Marxists had tended to respond to the gap between the reformist present and idealised revolutionary future in one of three ways, either by following Engels and Kautsky in deifying history as a super-sensible solution to this problem, or following Lukács in deifying the party as the conduit of truth existing in an idealised plane above the proletariat, or incoherently combining elements from both of these standpoints (MacIntyre 1995, 101). MacIntyre’s break with the revolutionary left at this juncture resulted from his inability to accept any of these positive perspectives.

MacIntyre was right to reject these models of socialist practice, but he erred in assuming that Lenin’s politics could be subsumed within the parameters of this critique. Ironically, MacIntyre’s own comments in Dependant Rational Animals and elsewhere on the virtues of trade unionism contradict his more general account of the consequences of working-class alienation in a way that points back to Lenin. Gramsci’s interpretation of Lenin’s politics shows that Leninism presupposes the existence of spontaneous forms of struggle against alienation from within alienation. If Marxist political practice is conceived, from this perspective, as a series of interventions within the movement from below on the basis of the socialism immanent to this movement, these interventions cannot, however, be reduced, contra James and MacIntyre, to a simple attempt to “align” politics with the movement from below (James, Lee, and Castoriadis 2005, 125, 172) because the movement from below is simultaneously reformist as well as revolutionary. If the contradictory nature of the working-class movement is the basis for Marxist politics, it would be a mistake to dismiss this form of politics as an abstract utopia susceptible to Nietzschean critique because it is rooted in a tradition of solidarity reproduced through working-class struggles against alienation.

Moreover, the roots of Gramsci’s approach to politics in Marx’s theory of alienation suggests forms of social practice that are not only immanent to social relations but which also point in the direction of realising our potential for truly human liberation through these social relations. In so doing, it points to a solution to a problem internal to MacIntyre’s mature ethics. For while MacIntyre recognises he had previously been “in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible” (MacIntyre 1999, x), he has not adequately synthesised his historical and sociological account of practices and traditions with the biologically rooted ethics outlined in Dependant Rational Animals. Indeed, though MacIntyre is undoubtedly right to claim that we need to develop the
virtues of dependent rational animals if we are to flourish in the world (MacIntyre 1999, 5), his writings provide no sense of how practices might emerge that are intimately linked to the struggle against human alienation by the new social forces created through the process of alienation. Consequently, he tends towards a dualist perspective of goods internal to practices on the one hand and of natural goods on the other (MacIntyre 2007, 187; 1999, 78).

MacIntyre’s attempt in Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity to borrow from Marx’s critique of political economy in his synthetic neo-Aristotelianism is suggestive of a way out of this dilemma. However, his one-sidedly negative interpretation of Marx’s conception of alienation acts as a barrier to a full realisation of this potential synthesis. Marx’s more dialectical understanding of alienation illuminates not only barriers to human liberation but also means through which these barriers might be overcome. By linking the (admittedly inadequately theorised) practices of working-class solidarity with the struggle against alienation, Marx and Lenin point to the kind of historical model of human liberation that tends to be lost in the gaps between the sociological and naturalistic models of ethics outlined in After Virtue and Dependent Rational Animals respectively.

Conclusion

If James’s critique of Trotsky pointed to a renewal of Marx’s synthesis of social and natural history through his contribution to overcoming the crisis of post-war Trotskyism, his inadequate theory of political practice meant his, and MacIntyre’s, project stalled. By returning through Gramsci and Bloch to Lenin we can begin to reconceive Marxist politics not as an abstract utopia of the future but as a concrete utopia rooted in, but not reducible to, immanent tendencies within the present. This argument suggests that while Marxists have much to learn from MacIntyre about social practices, Marx offers MacIntyreans a basis to synthesise social and naturalistic conceptions of ethics through his dialectical account of the concretely utopian struggle against alienation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kristyn Gorton, Christian Høgsbjerg, Kelvin Knight and Jeffery Nicholas for their comments on this paper in draft.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

*Paul Blackledge* teaches in the School of Social Sciences, London South Bank University in London, UK, and researches into Marxism and ethical theory. He is the author of *Frederick Engels* (SUNY Press, 2019), *Marxism and Ethics* (SUNY Press, 2012), *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History* (Manchester University Press, 2006) and *Perry Anderson, Marxism and the New Left* (Merlin Press, 2004). He is also co-editor of *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre’s Revolutionary Aristotelianism* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism:*
Selected Writings 1953–1974 (Brill, 2008), Revolutionary Aristotelianism: Ethics, Resistance and Utopia (Lucius and Lucius, 2008), and Historical Materialism and Social Evolution (Palgrave, 2002).

References

Blackledge, P. 2001. “Rationalist Capitalist Concerns: William Cail and the Great Rugby Split of 1895.” The International Journal of the History of Sport 18 (2): 35–53.

Blackledge, P. 2005. “Freedom, Desire and Revolution: Alasdair MacIntyre’s Early Marxist Ethics.” History of Political Thought 26 (4): 696–720.

Blackledge, P. 2006. “Results and Prospects: Trotsky and His Critics.” In Permanent Revolution—Results and Prospects 100 Years On, edited by B. Dunn and H. Radice, 48–60. London: Pluto.

Blackledge, P. 2007a. “Morality and Revolution: Ethical Debates in the British New Left.” Critique 35 (2): 211–228.

Blackledge, P. 2007b. “Alasdair MacIntyre: Marxism and Politics.” Studies in Marxism, no. 11: 95–116.

Blackledge, P. 2008. “Alasdair MacIntyre’s Contribution to Marxism: A Road Not Taken.” In Revolutionary Aristotelianism: Ethics, Resistance and Utopia, edited by P. Blackledge, and K. Knight, 215–227. Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius.

Blackledge, P. 2009. “Alasdair MacIntyre: Social Practices, Marxism and Ethical Anti-Capitalism.” Political Studies 57 (4): 866–884.

Blackledge, P. 2010. “Marxism, Nihilism and the Problem of Ethical Politics Today.” Socialism and Democracy 24 (2): 101–123.

Blackledge, P. 2012. Marxism and Ethics. New York: SUNY Press.

Blackledge, P. 2014a. “Alasdair MacIntyre as a Marxist and as a Critic of Marxism.” American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly 88 (4): 705–724.

Blackledge, P. 2014b. “Sport: Capitalism at Play.” Socialist Review, no. 390: 20–22.

Blackledge, P. 2017. The Dialectics of Work and Leisure in Marx, Lukács and Lefebvre. In The Palgrave Handbook of Leisure Theory, edited by K. Spracklen, B. Lashua, E. Sharpe, and S. Swain, 473–486. London: Palgrave.

Blackledge, P. 2018. “Hegemony and Intervention.” Science and Society 82 (4): 481–501.

Blackledge, P. 2019a. “On Strategy and Tactics: Marxism and Electoral Politics.” Science and Society 83 (3): 355–380.

Blackledge, P. 2019b. Friedrich Engels. New York: SUNY Press.

Bloch, E. 1986. The Principle of Hope. 3 vols. Oxford: Blackwell.

Engels, F. (1891) 1990. “A Critique of the Draft Programme of 1891.” In Marx and Engels Collected Works, vol. 27, 219–234. Moscow: Progress.

Gramsci, A. 1971. Selections from the Prison Notebooks. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Harman, C. 2005. “From Common Sense to Good Sense.” Socialist Review, no. 292. Accessed 10 May 2018. https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/2005/01/sense.htm.

Høgsbjerg, C. 2018. “C. L. R. James’s ‘British Civilization? Excavating the ‘Dark Unfathomed Caves’ of Beyond a Boundary.” In Marxism, Colonialism and Cricket, edited by D. Featherstone, C. Gair, C. Høgsbjerg, and A. Smith, 51–71. London: Duke University Press.

James, C. L. R. 1946. “After Ten Years: On Trotsky’s The Revolution Betrayed.” New International 12 (8). Accessed 10 May 2018. https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1946/10/revbetrayed.htm.

James, C. L. R. (1937) 2017. World Revolution. London: Duke University Press.

James, C. L. R. (1938) 2001. The Black Jacobins. London: Penguin.

James, C. L. R. (1948) 1980. Notes on Dialectics. London: Allison & Busby.

James, C. L. R. (1963) 2005. Beyond a Boundary. London: Yellow Jersey.

James, C. L. R. 1986. State Capitalism and World Revolution. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr.

James, C. L. R. 1994. “Trotsky’s Place in History.” In C. L. R. James and Revolutionary Marxism, edited by S. McLemee, and P. Le Blanc, 92–130. New Jersey: Humanities.

James, C. L. R., G. C. Lee, and C. Castoriadis. (1958) 2005. Facing Reality. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr.
Kidron, M. 1962. “Reform and Revolution.” International Socialism, no. 7: 15–21.
Knight, K. 2007. Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre. Cambridge: Polity.
Lenin, V. I. 1961a. “The Persecutors of Zemsv and The Hannibals of Liberalism.” In Lenin Collected Works, vol. 5, 31–80. Moscow: Progress.
Lenin, V. I. 1961b. “What Is to Be Done?” In Lenin Collected Works, vol. 5, 347–529. Moscow: Progress.
Lih, L. 2006. Lenin Rediscovered. Leiden: Brill.
Lukács, G. (1924) 1970. Lenin: A Study in the Unity of His Thought. London: New Left Books.
MacIntyre, A. 1953. Marxism: An Interpretation. London: SCM Press.
MacIntyre, A. (1981) 2007. After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory. 3rd ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
MacIntyre, A. 1990. Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry. London: Duckworth.
MacIntyre, A. 1995. Marxism and Christianity. London: Duckworth.
MacIntyre, A. 1998. “The Theses on Feuerbach: A Road not Taken.” In The MacIntyre Reader, edited by K. Knight, 223–234. Cambridge: Polity.
MacIntyre, A. 1999. Dependent Rational Animals. London: Duckworth.
MacIntyre, A. 2006. Ethics and Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
MacIntyre, A. 2008a. “Notes from the Moral Wilderness.” In Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings 1953–1974, edited by P. Blackledge, and N. Davidson, 45–68. Leiden: Brill.
MacIntyre, A. 2008b. “Freedom and Revolution.” In Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings 1953–1974, edited by P. Blackledge, and N. Davidson, 123–134. Leiden: Brill.
MacIntyre, A. 2008c. “Rejoinder to Left Reformism.” In Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings 1953–1974, edited by P. Blackledge, and N. Davidson, 187–196. Leiden: Brill.
MacIntyre, A. 2008d. “Trotsky in Exile.” In Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings 1953–1974, edited by P. Blackledge, and N. Davidson, 267–276. Leiden: Brill.
MacIntyre, A. 2008e. “How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary: Ethics, Resistance, and Utopia.” Philosophy of Management 7 (1): 3–7.
MacIntyre, A. 2016. Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning and Narrative. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Marcuse, H. 1958. Soviet Marxism. New York: Columbia University Press.
Marx, K. (1844) 1975a. “Comments on James Mill.” In Marx and Engels Collected Works, vol. 3, 211–228. Moscow: Progress.
Marx, K. (1844) 1975b. “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.” In Marx and Engels Collected Works, vol. 3, 231–346. Moscow: Progress.
Marx, K., and F. Engels. (1845) 1975. “The Holy Family.” In Marx and Engels Collected Works, vol. 4, 7–211. Moscow: Progress.
Miller, R. 1989. “Marx and Aristotle.” In Marxist Theory, edited by A. Callinicos, 175–210. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Rosengarten, F. 2007. Urbane Revolutionary: C. L. R. James and the Struggle for a New Society. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
Sayers, S. 2011. Marx and Alienation. London: Palgrave.
Trotsky, L. (1936) 1972. The Revolution Betrayed. New York: Pathfinder.
Trotsky, L. 1958. Trotsky’s Diary in Exile, 1935. London: Faber & Faber.