

# THE DIALECTICAL IMAGINATION BY MARTIN JAY: TRUTH AND FACTS

Until the Enlightenment, everyone thought that there were Absolute Truths. It was the only way to understand the physical, social and psychological state in which humans existed. God spoke to humans and established the Absolute Truth. Those who trespassed against that Truth were burned at the stake, as Giordano Bruno, or exiled. That was true of all religions and all philosophers too.

That view has never died out. It's the root of fundamentalisms of all denominations, and even among quasi-believers it is widely held. I think it is a core principle of conservatism, at least in practice. For example they all seem to believe in the Absolute Truth that tax cuts are always the solution to any perceived problem. And neoliberals assert it too, at least in their public statements; who knows what, if anything they actually believe or if there is an authentic neoliberal self that has a principle that doesn't involve money or power.

It's important to note that not all religions today teach that they are in possession of Absolute Truth. From its beginning, for example, the Jews did not name or describe the Almighty. They knew they were not like the Almighty, and thus could not expect to understand the nature of the Almighty. In the same way, Catholics who accept the teachings of Vatican II know that even the moral guidance of the Pope is subject to the considered judgment of the People of God. Catholics do not surrender their moral agency. Instead, dogma is guided by the lived experience of the faithful believer.

It seems odd that anyone would claim to speak for the Almighty, but people always have and

still do. Some claim to know the will of the Almighty from an ancient text or because they heard it from someone who they believe speaks for the Almighty in our time. Still others claim the authority to interpret those texts as a guide to living in a society vastly different from that in which they were first written down.

It's a small step from believing that one knows the will of the Almighty to believing that some social practice is ordained by the Almighty. It's another small step to believe some theory of society or economics or politics reflects the will of the Almighty. It's easy to see how this practice infects and affects vast numbers of people.

The struggle among these people is for dominance in the definitions of Absolute Truth. It isn't just preachers and religious leaders who try to create Absolute Truths, there are plenty of politicians and others whose interests are served by linking their projects to Absolute Truth. Obviously this struggle doesn't take place in the realm of reason, because absolutes are not subject to reason, or to argument, or to persuasion of any external kind. The truth is a whole, and the believers hold that whole. As an example, the Nazis tried to root out "Jewish Physics", embodied by Albert Einstein, as anti-Aryan. Einstein was a theorist, not an experimenter, and the guy driving this absurd idea was an Aryan experimenter.

In contrast to the absolutists, a lot of people began to lose that certainty at the time of the Enlightenment. By the early 1900s, most thinking people were trying to come to grips with the absence of certainty. The members of the Frankfurt School certainly did not believe in Absolute Truth. Here's Martin Jay:

... Dialectics probed the "force-field," to use an expression of Adorno's, between consciousness and being, subject and object. It did not, indeed could not, pretend to have discovered ontological first principles. It

rejected the extremes of nominalism and realism and **remained willing to operate in a perpetual state of suspended judgment.**

Hence the crucial importance of mediation (Vermittlung) for a correct theory of society. No facet of social reality could be understood by the observer as final or complete in itself. There were no social "facts," as the positivists believed, which were the substratum of a social theory. Instead, there was a constant interplay of particular and universal, of "moment"\* and totality.

P. 54, emphasis added..

One way to think about this point of view is to recognize that scientific theories are subject to massive revision. That's the point of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. It's a painful process, but necessary for science. If that's true for our best and most focused practical thinking, it's impossible to imagine that there are Absolute Truths about human beings and their intricate social relations and their personal projects and desires. Dialectics, mediation, neither will uncover universal truths.

This general view has been common for some time among academics. Here's a nice example provided by Andrew Bacevich. It's a speech given by Carl Becker in his capacity as president of the American Historical Association in 1931. Becker defines history as "... the memory of things said and done." Those memories may include things witnessed or said or done by a person, and it may include other people's memories passed along in writing or otherwise, and it may include true, false and mixed memories. He explains that "For all practical purposes history is, for us and for the time being, what we know it to be."

Throughout the speech, he compares the professional historian to Mr. Everyman, the

average person in the street.

In constructing this more remote and far-flung pattern of remembered things, Mr. Everyman works with something of the freedom of a creative artist; the history which he imaginatively recreates as an artificial extension of his personal experience will inevitably be an engaging blend of fact and fancy, a mythical adaptation of that which actually happened.

We can see this process when we look at how the myths of slavery and the Confederacy were generated purposefully by those with something to gain, as Ibram Kendi shows in *Stamped From The Beginning*. The process continues today as the true believers on the Texas School Board work to erase from our collective memory the vicious brutality of slavery and to replace it with the absurd view that slaves were happy under the whip of their white owners.

The Frankfurt School teaches that all our ideas and theories should be tested by what Jay calls the tribunal of reason. According to Jay, they didn't have a clear definition of "reason" or of "truth". As he explains, the dialectic is great for attacking existing ideas, but it won't establish any truths itself.

Jay says that the Frankfurt School "...remained willing to operate in a perpetual state of suspended judgment." That's fine for analysis, but at some point, you have to act. It seems to me he is saying that the role of reason is to make sure that when you act you are making the best possible choice about the act, and about the goal of the act. And that is a good description of praxis.

I won't go further, because the contributions of the Frankfurt School in understanding society and working towards a better society do not depend on it. One such contribution, the concept of the Authoritarian Personality, deals directly

with the true believers.