

ONE

INTRODUCTION

Any effort today to revisit the modern dialectical tradition is to set out upon a beleaguered intellectual terrain. To put an ironic twist on the famed words of one of our conversation partners, we might say that the dialectical has become a tradition of dead generations, and one that really only weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.¹ Nowadays mention of the dialectical legacy seems only to invoke forlorn specters of closed teleological narratives, presumptuous ontological assumptions, perhaps the delusional hubris of a grand Hegelian style of theorization. We are dealing, it would seem, with a rather forgettable legacy of modernist excess. But of course so much of this is common conjecture, based on a simplistic caricature of an elusive philosophical legacy. And part of the challenge here, a charge that doubles as part of the rationale for this project, is to expose such conjecture for what it is, to tell a broader and richer story about what dialectical thinking entails, in order ultimately to mine a set of intellectual resources that have tended to get buried under the purported dead weight of Hegelian and Marxian modernism.

One objective of this book, then, is to confront a historical problem, to pursue a more generous and nuanced reading of a complex and evolving set of ideas. But ultimately the project is stirred by an increasingly unsettling political problem. Marx's amplification of Hegelian thinking has forever linked the dialectical tradition with revolutionary politics. And this would seem to imply that the tradition sits rather uneasily with the general political ethos of the early twenty-first century. Today we confront a peculiar political moment in which so many seem so fired by discontent and yet so burned by resignation. It is, some have suggested, a kind of postpolitical age, one in which grim prospects for collective action, increasingly fugitive hopes for real structural change, undergird an embrace of the ethical as a preferred site of public engagement. This turn to ethics, to questions of how we might live the established structures rather than contest their hegemony, threatens

only to exacerbate a public life increasingly devoid of substance or interest. Certainly the impulse to revisit the legacy of Hegel and Marx, to reconsider a dialectically informed critical theory, is moved by a felt need for some renewed political fervor. But what is referred to here as a *spirit of critique* is intended to address contemporary discourse on its own terms, to address the essentially *ethical* question of *how we engage* the political. The idea, the wager, is that a reconsideration of the dialectical tradition might help to reanimate the critical imagination in our time and to inform a public ethos imbued with a sharper and more politically incisive critical edge.

So the argument put forth in this book is moved by a historical problem and by a political one, and this introductory chapter sets out to elaborate on these twin concerns. Insofar as the overarching concern is to engage with the modern dialectical tradition, it is important to note at the outset that we are dealing with a rich, wide-ranging, and still evolving body of work. Any attempt to fully canvas the tradition today would require a rather Sisyphean sense of determination, and what has worked its way into the pages of this book amounts neither to a general introduction nor to a comprehensive survey.² While I engage initially with Hegel and Marx, with the root sources of the tradition, I focus most intently on Jean-Paul Sartre, Theodor W. Adorno, and C. L. R. James, three twentieth-century theorists who have caught my attention in a unique way and who have inspired me to craft a particular story about dialectical thinking and its enduring political import. I will outline the basic contours of this story in a moment. First I will provide some additional context by elaborating further on the two basic concerns that animate the project.

THE DIALECTICAL TRADITION

If already in the foregoing the term *tradition* has appeared too often, there are several reasons for this indulgence. In the first instance, the reference serves a kind of ancillary function, allowing us to manage the delicacy and inherent difficulty of the other terms that are, or could be, for our purposes attached to it. By referring to the *tradition*, we are able initially to simply add the adjective *dialectical* and to avoid immediate connection with what is often referred to more specifically as *the dialectic*. These terminological distinctions are subtle, to be sure. But they are quite significant. As the literary critic Fredric Jameson points out, “the parts of speech offer so many camera angles from which unsuspected functions and implications might be seized and inspected,” and “to speak of *the dialectic*, with a definite article or a capital letter,” he says, “is to subsume all the varieties of dialectical thinking under a single philosophical system, and probably, in the process, to affirm that this system is the truth, and ultimately the only viable philosophy.” In

contrast to the noun with the definite article, the adjective *dialectical* can apply more broadly and is often used to describe various modes of apprehension that “rebuke established thought processes” and that challenge “the lazy habits of common sense.”³ There is, of course, far more to it than this. But as regards choice words for an introduction, the adjective provides for our purposes a better initial inroad.

This is not to suggest in some ironic way that *the dialectic*, understood as a grand philosophical system or method, is somehow inessential to the modern dialectical *tradition*.⁴ Another reason to emphasize the *tradition* is precisely to indicate that we must wrestle with certain philosophical residues of the nineteenth century, we must trace the established contours, as well as the well-worn conjectures and caricatures, of Hegelian and Marxian modernism, and not merely to cast aside elements of the tradition that may be unfashionable by today’s standards, but, more principally, to embed our appreciation for dialectical thinking within an account of its historical emergence. We would do well, as I explain in chapter 2, to focus on Hegel’s development of the Kantian “critical” philosophy, for dialectical thinking as we know it emerges in Hegel as part of an attempt to situate the autonomous or self-legislating subject in an experiential and phenomenological milieu, to demonstrate the unfolding process by which human beings wrestle with the given terms of the status quo—the tradition of dead generations, as Marx might put it—in order to resist dogmatic assumptions and blind acquiescence and to work to produce for themselves authoritative reasons for belief and action. Whatever else this complex and evolving dialectical tradition might be said to imply, it must be seen to reflect fundamentally a mode of thinking that is deeply interconnected with the struggle for autonomy, the struggle for individual and collective self-determination.

In terms of our apprehension of the tradition, so much depends on our perception of who is doing this dialectical thinking. The tendency is to focus on the likes of Hegel and Marx, to imagine the dialectician as a high theorist or grand historian set off somehow from the subject matter that she or he seeks to explain. Here the dialectic is perceived as a kind of method, which can, in the hands of the trained observer, reveal a systematic or totalizing process by which these struggles for autonomy pan out. And this perception supports some of the more familiar images associated with the tradition, images of “thesis-antithesis-synthesis,” of the “natural laws” made famous by Engels, of the obstetric role of the dialectician in helping to birth historical progress and deliver the inevitable reconciliation of opposing forces, both social and material.⁵ This is one perception of the tradition. But the whole thing takes on a slightly different character if we focus more intently on the subject matter, if we locate dialectical thinking at the site of lived experience. Here things become more personal, more

intimate and vivid, for we come to see our own lives as situated within a totality of social relations, run up against dissatisfying contradictions of various kinds. Lacking both scholarly distance and historical hindsight, we cannot really bear witness to any grand promise of ultimate reconciliation, nor can we find any real logical pattern implicit to a struggle that presumably we share with those around us. We simply find ourselves mired in the struggle, and dialectical thinking, dialectical critique, emerges as part of a theoretical account, both descriptive and diagnostic, of our human effort to move through the world and to carve out a more self-satisfying and sustainable existence. As we move forward in these pages, we will consider how this site of lived experience is a fundamental, if undervalued, dimension of the tradition going back to Hegel.

Here at the outset it will be helpful to provide a slightly more structured, if still rather terse and provisional, account of what the dialectical tradition means for us, and once again Jameson provides useful reference, in this case a working analytical framework that underscores three characteristic features. First of all, he says, the tradition implies a distinctive orientation toward “reflexivity, or thinking itself.” It implies “a recognition of the way in which we are mired in concepts of all kinds and a strategy for lifting ourselves above that situation, not for changing the concepts exactly but for getting a little distance from them.”⁶ The point here is that we necessarily find ourselves situated in a particular conceptual world—what Hegel refers to as the “understanding” (*Verstand*) or the established contours of “ethical life” (*Sittlichkeit*)—and dialectical thinking, in reflexive fashion and, again, in the service of the struggle for autonomy, refers back to the subject, in order to emphasize the ways in which we may be beholden to a conceptual reality that constrains or limits our prospects for a more substantive enjoyment of our human freedom. Here the philosophical traces of the nineteenth century are on full display, and as we move forward we will have to consider the extent to which dialectical thinking, in its reflexivity, is grounded fundamentally in a set of controversial assumptions about the subject, the presumed self-sovereign subject.

The reflexive character of dialectical thinking reflects a “synchronic” dimension of the tradition, Jameson says, but the tradition also “has to do with telos, narrative, and history: with the story of change, or in other words, with the diachronic, rather than with the structures of consciousness as such.”⁷ And here we can point to a second feature, which derives from a rather distinctive orientation toward historical narrative and explanation. In a very fundamental sense, to think is to tell a story, and dialectical thinking is said to yield a particular kind of story, a particular kind of narrative, one that unfolds according to the designs of a particular plot structure. Many observers of the tradition, certainly its detractors, focus on

the ways in which dialectical thinking engenders, or is perhaps engendered by, a rather determined reconciliatory narrative, one in which, at the end of the day, conflicting elements are resolved and some sort of primordial unity is restored. And certainly this kind of narrative structure is part of the tradition. But, to say it again, we find ourselves obliged to expose certain conjectures, and perhaps dialectical narratives need not be teased along by the promise of ultimate reconciliation, or perhaps this is not the only kind of story brought to life in and through a dialectical mode of apprehension. These questions surrounding “the diachronic” will animate our discussion in chapter 2; for now, I will simply refer again to the context of Hegel’s initial turn to dialectical thinking, his effort to situate the autonomous subject within an experiential milieu. If we locate dialectical thinking at the site of lived experience, perhaps its story is less a tale of our self-assured travels on the path toward triumph and accord and more an account of our precarious travails on what Hegel at one point calls “the pathway of despair.”⁸ After all, if we find ourselves in pursuit of our autonomy, struggling to stake out a self-satisfying and sustainable way of life in the world with others, and if we find ourselves run up at every turn against a conceptual and material reality that complicates and frustrates our best intentions, then it would seem that dialectical thinking is rather poised, in an almost tragic fashion, simply to vivify this complication, this frustration. In any case, we will have to consider, indeed to reconsider, the ways in which dialectical thinking yields a story, an account, of a particular kind.

Finally, as regards a third characteristic feature of the tradition, we need look no further than to the general theme of contradiction. “What defines the dialectic above all,” Jameson says, “is the observation—everywhere and always—of contradictions as such. Wherever you find them, you can be said to be thinking dialectically; whenever you fail to see them, you can be sure that you have stopped doing so.”⁹ To this I would add simply that an emphasis on the *tradition* has the effect of foregrounding a particular set of contradictions, principally that between subject and object, but also, by extension, the contradiction between theory and practice, or form and content. Part of what is distinctive about the legacy of Hegel and Marx is that it encourages us, “everywhere and always,” to keep on the lookout for objective conditions, or established terms and features of our given reality, which frustrate or discourage our subjectivity, our humanity. We are encouraged to identify disparities between, on the one hand, our sense of who we are and what we can do, and, on the other, the actual world that we face, our conceptual and material reality. We are encouraged cognitively to “sharpen,” as Hegel might say, any perceived disparities into full-fledged contradictions, which, in good dialectical spirit, cannot and should not be sustained. In this way, the dialectical impetus toward seeing, finding, perhaps imagining or creating

contradictions is, in the tradition going back to Hegel and Marx, an impetus toward critique, toward provocation, indeed toward active political protest.

These three features of the tradition will need to be developed in the ensuing chapters. But perhaps it is apparent already that this rather cursory review, taking its cues from Jameson's analytical framework and adding its own lines of emphasis, is constructed as to highlight the tradition's implicit normative commitments. There is a kind of humanism at work here, which, I wager, may be worthy of reconsideration rather than mere disavowal. Dialectical thinking emerges largely in the service of this humanism, and for our purposes the need to make good on this claim is a driving reason why we refer principally to the *tradition*. With that we can turn now to speak more directly to our political concern, specifically to the need today for a renewed spirit of critique.

A SPIRIT OF CRITIQUE

To be sure, *spirit* is another difficult term, its ambiguity and inherent convolution only confounded by its situation here. So fundamental yet so elusive in Hegel's thinking, so thoroughly disparaged, at least nominally, in Marx's and that of his "materialist" progeny, the term as such does not seem to occupy an especially secure place in the dialectical tradition broadly conceived. Of course I am referring here to a very special sense of the term, the sense of Hegelian *Geist*, which surely is aligned in Hegel's philosophy with the turn to dialectical thinking, insofar as it signals a philosophical perspective that pushes beyond the empirically observable world, beyond the "positive" sciences, a perspective that tries to grasp our human and worldly situation in its totality and in its implicit historical movement toward ultimate reconciliation.¹⁰ This specifically Hegelian concept of spirit will receive some treatment as we move forward, most notably in reference to the reconciliatory plot structure of the dialectical narrative. But generally this concept lies beyond the scope of our concern, not only because adequate treatment would require that we extend the project beyond a manageable size but also, and more significantly, because Hegelian spirit, whether "Absolute" or "objective," has the rather infamous effect of belittling or disavowing the critical capacities of ordinary people.

As I have indicated already, the impulse to strike out on this project derives in part from a concern about a contemporary political situation in which the critical energies of ordinary people have become increasingly belittled and disavowed, a peculiar situation in which many seem at once self-conscious of this impotence, profoundly discontented with it, and yet thoroughly resigned to it. If in our acquiescence we are mere "bearers" or "carriers" (*Träger*) of Hegelian spirit, beholden to what Heinrich Heine once

characterized as the “servile” dimension of Hegelian thinking, then it is not clear what we might stand to gain politically from its reconsideration.¹¹ Part of what is needed today is a spirit or energy that can move citizens to carry themselves through the political world and with an inspired moral sensibility and a corresponding critical edge. It is in this sense that we invoke the term *spirit*, as to signal something like an inspired critical *ethos* that might cash out at the site of lived experience.

But we prefer the term *spirit* over *ethos*, and for a couple of reasons. Thirty years ago, Michel Foucault began to circulate the latter term as part of an attempt to describe a new approach to the practice of critique.¹² He suggested that we might think of critique as a kind of attitude, a tone, a way of thinking and feeling, “a bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an *ethos*.”¹³ And yet the very idea of a *critical ethos* seems a bit curious, especially in our time. Regarding the term’s Greek origins, we can look of course to Aristotle, for whom *ethos*, like *logos* and *pathos*, has to do principally with rhetorical appeal and in particular with the way in which a speaker might cultivate a sense of community with his or her audience, a sense of belonging that encourages the audience to embrace the speaker’s character and by extension the speaker’s argument.¹⁴ We see here that *ethos* has to do with community and belonging, with a shared public space, and indeed with a set of public practices that are *characteristic of* established norms, routines, and expectations.¹⁵ This is not to say that a particular *ethos*, a particular attitude or tone, cannot distress the established contours of its constitutive community and work to transform them in certain regards; the skilled rhetorician does not, after all, merely tell the audience what it wants to hear. But in order to speak of an *ethos*, one must consider the established community from which that *ethos* emerges or in which that *ethos* might realistically take hold. And nowadays, in the throes of neoliberal hegemony, in a world in which the dominant community has become a kind of anti-community of isolated and increasingly self-oriented individuals, one might wonder just how a *critical ethos* could be cultivated or sustained.¹⁶

Of course public life has never been an expression of a singular or unified community, and if the political ever appears given to consensus, this is likely an effect either of brute physical repression or more subtle and nefarious ideological obfuscation. Our political world is always already torn between winners and losers, always already fractured by competing interests, however complex and obscured these interests may be. And though a particular set of interests may take precedence at a given historical moment, there are always, as Adorno once suggested, certain “gaps” or “waste products” or “blind spots” that elude the jurisdiction of the order of things and that provide some alternative ground, however minimal, for oppositional sentiment.¹⁷ It is from the shaded soil of this alternative ground that something

like a critical ethos might take root today, for, as Stephen White has suggested, our “ontological sources,” our fundamental commitments about the nature of human being and the world, can be said to “prefigure” our “cognitive perspective, moral bearing, and aesthetic-affective sensibility” and thereby facilitate “an orientation, or disposition, toward everyday life and the ethical and political problems that we encounter there.”¹⁸ Part of our objective in mining the dialectical tradition is precisely to unearth a set of basic commitments, what have become by today’s standards simply inexpedient “waste products,” which might inform an alternative way of engaging the political.

Still, we prefer the term *spirit*, if only because our concern has to do precisely with how we engage *the political*. The question of *how we engage*, plainly the stuff of ethos, is often seen more broadly as the stuff of ethical technique or know-how, and, as such, precisely *not* the stuff of the political. And indeed the language of ethics poses a series of problems that we need to consider.¹⁹ As Raymond Geuss reminds us, “ethics is usually dead politics: the hand of a victor in some past conflict reaching out to try to extend its grip to the present and the future.”²⁰ The concern here, of course, is that by focusing on ethics, by resigning ourselves to the ethical register, we in effect double down on our resignation, for the ethical as such signals little more than a respectful homage at the hand of the political victor. To be sure, this sort of complaint may be a bit overstated. But we should note that a general suspicion of ethics has always been a distinctive quality of the dialectical tradition. As Sartre, one of our featured interlocutors, remarked decades ago, “ethics is a collection of idealistic tricks intended to enable us to live the life imposed on us by the poverty of our resources and the insufficiency of our techniques.”²¹ If we focus merely on our ethical affairs, if we focus on our daily interactions with those closest to us, we tend, Sartre says, to “*pass over in silence* the injustices of the age, the class struggle, colonialism, Anti-Semitism, etc.,” we effectively “*take advantage of the oppression in order to do good*” and any “good that [we] try to do [tends to] be vitiated at the roots . . . turned into radical evil.”²² These general reservations about the ethical provide important context for any consideration of dialectical critique, which, to be sure, is moved by a very different objective. As Max Horkheimer put it in his initial articulation of the program of the early Frankfurt School, the aim of dialectically informed critical theory is not to “eliminate one or other abuse” or to work toward “the better functioning of any element in the structure” but rather to embark on a wholesale appraisal of that structure.²³

To say it again, ours is a peculiar political moment. The “reign of ethics” today is largely symptomatic of a what is often characterized as a postmodern

or neoliberal condition in which political efforts to restore elite class power, efforts to widen inequalities and further erode social capital, are only exacerbated by the presumption, increasingly popular in the wake of Reagan and Thatcher, that, as the old saying goes, “there is no alternative.”²⁴ Nowadays so many are so profoundly frustrated by this state of affairs and yet so resigned to its inertia, and not merely because of the “poverty of our resources and the insufficiency of our techniques,” as Sartre would put it, but also because of the sheer magnitude and the bewildering complexities of the problems that we face. These deep challenges to effective democratic renewal are big problems indeed, overwhelming challenges that as such remain inadequately understood, challenges to which the chapters of this slim volume cannot possibly provide a sufficient response. But the story developed here is certainly carved out against this troubled political background, and what I describe as a *spirit of critique* is intended to enrich our sense of *how we engage the political*, our sense of how, in the very act of critique, in the work of thinking itself, we might resist mere resignation to dead politics and instead counsel an energy that can help bring politics as such back to life.

THE STORY

In the chapters to come I look initially to Hegel and Marx and then to Sartre, Adorno, and C. L. R. James in an effort to craft a particular story about dialectical thinking and its enduring political import. The first step in the process entails what I call a “restaging” of the dialectic (chapter 2). If to think is to provide an account of our lives and our world, to gather our sense perceptions and memories and expectations into a coherent narrative of some kind, then we might ask about the *kind of narrative* that our reflections engender or perhaps the kind of narrative that is *engendered by* our mode of reflection. Drawing on literary theory, and specifically on familiar contrasts between different dramatic genres or modes of narrative emplotment, I argue that in the modern tradition going back to Hegel and Marx, dialectical thinking, and indeed the dialectical narrative as such, is shaped by a kind of double plot structure, one that is both *comic*, in its final orientation toward harmonious reconciliation, and *tragic*, in its more proximate attentiveness to the vicissitudes of lived experience. The comic and the tragic are the two platforms—the two dramatic *stages*, as it were—upon which dialectical thinking plays out. And yet popular reception of the dialectical tradition has overwhelmingly privileged the comic stage over the tragic, and in such a way that dialectical thinking has come to be associated almost exclusively with the grand teleological narrative, with the promise of enlightenment and material and intellectual progress, perhaps even, in Hegel’s case, with some

sort of narrative theodicy in which the fallen qualities of the finite world are always already redeemed by the self-assured prophecy of divine purpose.

This account of dramatic genres is meant simply to facilitate a more generous consideration of how dialectical thinking speaks to political life and to a set of experiences that do not always lend themselves to the lighthearted assurances of comic relief. And here we foreground Hegel's own political commitments, for, as I mentioned already, dialectical thinking emerges in Hegel—and is carried on rather straightforwardly in Marx, despite his avowed hostility toward Hegelian “mysticism”—as part of an attempt both to explain and defend the conditions for the possibility of the autonomous or self-legislating subject. As Robert Pippin has emphasized in a recent work, part of Hegel's great philosophical innovation has to do precisely with the “claim that we require a ‘dialectical logic’ to do justice to a kind of subjectivity that could be said in some way to be its own normative or self-authorizing ‘ground.’”²⁵ The struggle for individual and collective self-determination, for a more self-satisfying and sustainable freedom, undergirds a distinctive humanist vision, which will demand our attention throughout the book. But at least initially, the shift to the tragic stage helps to reveal this humanism, this struggle for autonomy in the world with others, as an ongoing struggle indeed, one in which we find ourselves implicated, one the success of which is never guaranteed.

“The dialectic,” Jameson says, “is not to be understood merely as a success story, nor either as the experience of defeat: it consists in that difficult wisdom in which these two outcomes become one and the same, in which defeat becomes success, and success becomes defeat.”²⁶ The comic and the tragic stages both belong essentially to the dialectical tradition, and as we move into our discussion of the tradition's twentieth-century legatees, we will consider the ways in which these two narrative structures—and the attendant themes of success and defeat, hope and despair—interact with one another in ways that animate and sustain the critical imagination. But the initial challenge—and this is the principal objective of chapter 2, which is the most ambitious essay in the book—will be to recover the tragic as a kind of “blind spot” or “gap” in the conventional reception of the tradition. This initial move yields for our purposes at least three fundamental results. First, it helps us to situate dialectical thinking at the site of lived experience, as opposed to that of high theory or grand history. Second, it allows us to resist the idea that we are dealing only with a logical or formal method, for by embedding our consideration of dialectical thinking within an account of its historical emergence, we expose a mode of reflection imbued with moral substance; we reveal indeed a kind of reflective ethos that draws its sustenance from a series of normative commitments surrounding the struggle

for autonomy. And third, this restaging opens a window onto a mode of thinking that is attuned to the uncertain and contentious nature of the political, the nature of a world shot through with power and influence, ever torn between winners and losers, friends and enemies.

The lessons gleaned from this initial visit to the nineteenth century inform our consideration of a series of twentieth-century intellectuals, all of whom indicate various ways in which dialectical thinking can be said to orient, provoke, and sustain the critical imagination. In the case of Sartre (chapter 3), it is a matter of resisting the temptation, especially strong in the age of ethics, to project our thinking beyond the real world of political affairs, to imagine a public life removed or protected somehow from the deep conflicts and sedimented structural constraints that delimit individual and collective freedom. "This world is *difficult*," Sartre admits in his earliest phenomenological work, and the imagination as such affords an "escape from all the constraints of the *world*."²⁷ And Sartre himself, primarily in his early works, invests quite a bit of confidence in the power of ideas, the power of the imagination, to liberate us, at least existentially, from this otherwise burdensome human condition. But as Sartre becomes more politicized in the postwar period, as he commits himself ever more energetically not only to the class struggle but also to struggles for racial and colonial independence, he comes to embrace the dialectical tradition in a new way. He carves out an account of dialectical thinking that, in "reflexive" fashion, calls the imagination back to the site of thinking itself and indeed to a dialectically stylized figuration of our lived experience, what he refers to as a "milieu of scarcity." Building on the old dialectical adage that we make our history not of our own choosing but under conditions handed down from past generations, Sartre invokes dialectical thinking, at least partly, in an attempt to focus reflective attention on persistent conflicts, on the ways in which our present reality is always already an expression of past conflicts—indeed an expression of "dead politics"—and on the ways in which any critical engagement with this reality demands our own participation in active contestation.²⁸

Our treatment of Sartre reveals a mode of thinking oriented almost exclusively toward the tragedies of lived experience. Our turn to Adorno (chapter 4), to a figure likewise known for his somber appraisals of the modern predicament, indicates how dialectical thinking might be teased along, however minimally, by an appeal to the transcendent. The dialectical tradition going back to the nineteenth century very plainly counsels something of a redemptive energy, a pull toward the transcendent that animates and sustains a critical perspective on the present. More fundamental than a set of "theological niceties" that may be tossed out alongside Hegelian "mysticism," this pull toward the transcendent, toward the promise of a radically alterna-

tive reality, very clearly moves a dialectical critique intended, as Marx might put it, to change the world. "The dialectic advances by way of extremes," Adorno says.²⁹ And Adorno reveals how extreme, even exaggerated, figurations of despair and redemption can work together in tension to enliven and sustain critical thinking in dark times. In what Robert Hullot-Kentor has aptly described as an "urgent passage," Adorno says "the only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption." He says that "perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will one day appear in the messianic light."³⁰ Ultimately I suggest that the structure of dialectical thinking as such provides a reflective framework for precisely this kind of critically animating interplay. Our dreadful moment is seen to be "indigent and distorted," and thus not good, not true, certainly not worthy of our support or affirmation, and this critical judgment is thrown into the boldest possible relief when fashioned "from the standpoint of redemption," when illuminated by the "messianic light" and thus confronted by the promise of a better world.

The chapters on Sartre and Adorno speak most directly to the structural qualities of dialectical thinking. Of course this is not to suggest that we intend somehow to disavow Sartre or Adorno's substantive moral commitments. Both theorists counsel a vision of human liberation, a vision itself born of the dialectical tradition. Both are affected deeply by a fundamental moral aversion to human pain and suffering. But to flesh out our embrace of the normative commitments at the heart of the dialectical tradition, we turn to C. L. R. James (chapter 5), an inspiring and unduly neglected West Indian writer who offers his own distinctively tragic renewal of the anthropological commitments that undergird dialectical critique.

Born and raised in Trinidad in the early part of the twentieth century, James developed into an original and prolific Marxist theorist and Pan-African intellectual. He is by far the least well known of our featured interlocutors, and we will of course have occasion to speak more fully to his life and background. But our basic objective will be to take cues from James's radically democratic sensibilities and from his rather distinctive postwar reading of Hegel's thinking on human desire and the tragic. As Cornelius Castoriadis once remarked, James "had this wonderful sense of the self-activity of the people, and he was able to translate it in universal terms that were not absolute universals."³¹ Influenced certainly by his own colonial background, concerned especially to give voice to the political struggles of Africana peoples throughout the diaspora, James builds upon a deep appreciation for popular political struggle to develop ultimately an account of human agency that is attuned to the ineluctably tragic nature

of human action. For James, the struggle for autonomy, the struggle to win for ourselves and for our communities an “actuality” that reflects our desires and talents and energies, is ever run up against challenges, complications, the essential uncertainties of a moving, changing modern world. Indeed our action as such, what makes us who and what we are, is also what exposes our essential vulnerability. For our purposes, these observations—confirmed for James in and through his reading of Hegel, in and through what amounts to a tragic restaging of the dialectical tradition—serve only to temper the humanist imaginary. Dialectical critique is ever teased along by the promise of subjective liberation, the promise of individual and collective autonomy or self-determination, and James for his part will never relinquish this moral vision. And in a way, as I will explain, James conceives of dialectical thinking as a kind of ethos of reflective engagement, a way of “sharpening” our instinctive frustrations into politically incisive contradictions that as such can help move the struggle for autonomy in a practical way. But ultimately what James gives us is a more nuanced conception of human agency, a tempered conception of the self-sovereign subject. Informed by an honest appreciation for the tragic nature of public action, this Jamesian conception can, I argue, provide a more suitable anthropological basis for a renewed spirit of dialectical critique.

Ultimately these chapters tell a sobering and at times rather somber tale. The effort to recover a tragic dimension of the dialectical tradition runs through the project as a guiding thread. And it is important to see that our appeal to the modern dialectical tradition, to a spirit of critique itself born of a bygone historical era, is by no means an expression of what Walter Benjamin once characterized as “left-wing melancholy.”³² While the prospects for revolution or concerted political intervention appear quite grim today, and while we may be inclined to characterize this moment, this age of ethics, in terms of a lamentable loss of the political or the absence of robust democratic publics, the objective throughout this book is not to cling to the revolutionary ideals of a nineteenth- and twentieth-century tradition to the detriment of whatever political action may be available at the start of the twenty-first. What is suggested here as a spirit of critique, grounded in the intellectual resources of the modern dialectical tradition, is meant to inform our engagement with the political, however reduced or fugitive that political has become. In a brief concluding segment (chapter 6), I suggest, in an admittedly speculative fashion, that a shared and distinctive conception of the political, one that is attuned to the fugitive character of meaningful collective experience, may undergird the thinking of Sartre, Adorno, and James, and in a way that speaks rather presciently to our own moment and thus to the timeliness of our efforts throughout these pages.