

Book Notes:

Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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LAWRENCE AND ENGELS ON LOVE AND JUSTICE – and the Coronavirus Crisis

How might D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930, born in England) and Frederick Engels (1820-1895; born in Germany), two men from northern England (Nottingham and Manchester), give some insight to today's issues – in this day of the Coronavirus Crisis?

Why these gentlemen please? Because many consider Lawrence the greatest English novelist of the 20th century. And Engels was the co-founder of world socialism, the biggest political movement of the 20th century and still lingering on in China, Russia, and Bernie Sanders, with much influence in the rest of the world.

They were humanists concerned with the poverty of life – Engels with physical poverty and Lawrence with the diminution of the soul. They both believed that capitalism and Christianity were contributing to the downfall of the West. Indeed, capitalism has become the civil religion of America, replacing the founding goals of liberty and equality.

Their burial places indicate something of their passions. Engels' ashes were scattered off Beachy Head in Sussex, a stunning row of white cliffs close to France and Europe. Lawrence died in France, but his remains are interred in a small chapel on the original Mabel Dodge Luhan ranch in New Mexico (now known as the D.H. Lawrence Ranch),



with a mural of a phoenix emerging from where his and his wife's ashes are buried. "I think New Mexico was the greatest experience from the outside world that I have ever had. It certainly changed me forever. Curious as it may sound, it was New Mexico that liberated me from the present era of civilization, the great era of material and mechanical development." ¹

They were not just critics – they had suggestions for life's betterment. Engels believed that capitalism must be replaced by communism not only for economics but also for the spiritual health of the world. Lawrence believed that Western society was dull and inauthentic and needed to be replaced by a combination of real love and a self-taught mixture of Native American and Mexican mystical religions that emphasized splendor, gorgeousness, and strength.

They wrote massively. But one little article by Engels and Lawrence's last book on the *Book of Revelation* are worth comparing. Engels liked it; Lawrence deplored it. But it helps show their concerns and solutions to the world's problems in a short, sharp, pithy way.

I begin with Lawrence despite his later timeline. Why? Because people adore love – that is what he is famous for. Look at pop lyrics, or what people take out from libraries, or most Broadway shows and Hollywood movies. They are mainly about love, not justice. Engels was concerned about the latter, but it gets rather short shrift in today's societies, yet it is an important step to correct Lawrence, thus the order in this paper.

I end with the Coronavirus Crisis. Why? To show that their insights stretch across most of life yesterday and today.

LAWRENCE – WHAT WAS HE UP TO?

He had much to say in novels, poems, and essays. The following is a brief summary of his thoughts on love, religion, and the cosmos:

Eros. Western life is a mess. It is grubby, greedy, and based on what can I obtain right now. Even love is mechanical. He wants to bring Eros² back into Western life and most of his stories either are dominated by this or touch on this theme. Later he wanted his vibrant version of Mexican native religion to replace lifeless Christianity.³ He liked what Jesus was up to with his self-giving love (agape). He was the "supreme desireless lover."⁴ But he believed that Jesus didn't go far enough and needed Eros, and in *The*

¹ D H Lawrence, "Studies in Classic American Literature", p.50, Cambridge University Press (2003)

² Defined in various ways by historians and philosophers. "Desire" is fundamental to Eros, but it can result in the search for many things – the true, good, beautiful, other people, knowledge, God, etc.

³ D H Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent* [Quetzalcoatl], Vintage International, 1992, originally published 1926

⁴ DH Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, The Cambridge Edition, ed Mara Kalnis, Intro by Melvyn Bragg, Granada, London, 1981, p 137

Man Who Died he has Jesus coming back from the dead and meeting a priestess of Isis. Through her he finds partial fulfillment, splendor, ecstasy, but he doesn't stay with her long and moves on to the unknown regions.

Reality. He wants “*real*” life for all and fie on materialism and greedy capitalism (though Lawrence, unlike GB Shaw and many British writes of his day, is a firm anti-Marxist). The *sun* is a major symbol which brings true life physically and metaphorically.⁵ The opposite is the pale Englishman whether the Lord of the Manor (in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*) or the typical American money-grubber. A northern uneducated, tempestuous miner has much more going for him than the sallow, insipid Oxford-educated publisher.⁶

Religion. Lawrence's last major effort was directed toward reforming the religion of the West. No task too great! “The human heart needs, needs, needs splendor, gorgeousness, pride, assumption, glory, and lordship ... perhaps even more than love ... or bread.”⁷ Western religion has been reduced into mere morality and in his own life he rejected the way Christianity had truncated living just as most human relationships had ruined love. It did not reach the heights it could have, especially the glories of a mystical relationship with the cosmos. He rejected his Congregationalist upbringing as narrow and mean, but he saw religion in the coal pits: “When I was a boy, I always thought a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night was a pit, with its steam, and its lights, and the burning bank – and I thought the Lord was always at the pit-top.”⁸ But he was unable to see the degradation of miners in the UK and elsewhere, and very little of his time and energy was spent understanding how society might make their lives more equal and fairer in the economy as well as seeing to the health of the miners who suffered horribly from black lung, emphysema, etc.

I-Thou; I-It. This distinction made a huge impression on Western philosophy and religion as first articulated by Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher. Lawrence has something similar that he calls I-Am; I-It. The idea is the same. The I-It relationship is mechanical, measuring, scientific, value-laden. The I-Thou relationship, whether between people, things, nature, God, is the acknowledgment of the other as authentic as oneself with an openness to the other's being at the deepest levels. A tree is an example Buber uses – one can measure, evaluate, estimate the cost, draw – or one can have a “rapport” and be changed and challenged by the tree. This is not easy to define, but most mystics know about it. “The modern physicist is on the brink of Nirvana”⁹ in

⁵ D H Lawrence, *The Sun*, in *The Collected Supernatural & Weird Fiction of DH Lawrence*, Leonaur, 2009, p1 67ff. Originally published ...

⁶ D H Lawrence, *Jimmy and the Desperate Woman*, in *The Woman Who Rode Away and Other Stories*, IC Gtesling, no date, p111ff. Originally published....

⁷ DH Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, The Cambridge Edition, ed Mara Kalnis, Intro by Melvyn Bragg, Granada, London, 1981, p 16

⁸ DH Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, Barnes & Nobel Classics, 2003 (originally published 1913), p 349. See Exodus 13.21-22

⁹ *Apocalypse*, op cit p 135

that the universe can be looked at in both I-It and I-Thou modes. “The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the power of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.”¹⁰

God. There are two major conceptions of God. In general, the Western way presumes a separation and distinction between God and the world. The Eastern way is pantheistic – God is us and we are God. “To the ancient consciousness, Matter, Materia, or Substantial things are God. A great rock is God. A pool of water is God.”¹¹ “That in the universe which contains the potentiality of all things, contains the potency also of thought and act and feeling and will, along with the rest. And this terrific and frightening and delighted potency I call Almighty God.”¹² The cosmos is alive, and he continually repeats in his later writings that the purpose of life is to be “breast to breast with the cosmos.” Lawrence is panentheistic, that is the world is God, but God is more than the world.¹³ There can be both a subjective and objective relation to God. His final words were a diatribe against the mechanical monsters in church and state that wanted to reduce life to a spiritual rubble (like most of the West is today). Here are the last words he wrote: “How they long for the destruction of the cosmos, secretly, these men of mind and spirit! How they work for its domination and final annihilation! ... Man cannot destroy the cosmos: that is obvious. But it is obvious that the cosmos can destroy man. Man must inevitably destroy himself, in conflict with the cosmos. It is perhaps his fate.”¹⁴

ENGELS – WHAT WAS HE UP TO?

Justice. *The Condition of the Working Class in England* written in 1844,¹⁵ contains data and reflection on the living conditions of working-class people in the British industrial cities before and after the Industrial Revolution. Engels found that, overall, mass migration to cities has reduced the quality of life for most workers, and that industrialization was, overall, much worse for most working people in terms of health and longevity and ruined so many millions.

Mortality from diseases such as smallpox and scarlet fever also increased dramatically – by four times as much in that era – and mortality from convulsions was 10-times higher in the city than it was in the country. In mill towns, the child mortality rate increased by a few hundred once the mill was introduced, and the death rate increased for adults who died before they turned thirty-nine.

¹⁰ Albert Einstein – source unknown

¹¹ *Apocalypse* p 46

¹² *Ibid* p 143

¹³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol I

¹⁴ *Ibid* p 173-4

¹⁵ Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Oxford, 2009

Revolution. “This lack of independence, Engels wrote, “led to discontent among the working population. People lacked the power to change their circumstances on an individual level. There was no shortage of labor, so businesses and stockholders had no incentive to improve working or living conditions for their miserable employees. The only method for changing this system at the time for Engels was revolution.”¹⁶

History. In 1850, Engels wrote on *The Peasant War in Germany* which was an armed revolt against feudalism. “Revolutionary doctrines were necessarily at the same time and mainly theological heresies. The existing social conditions had to be stripped of their halo of sanctity before they could be attacked.”¹⁷ In other words, theology was often a cover for the real social conditions. It was Thomas Munzer who led the revolt. Luther had given in to the bourgeoisies and castigated the peasants as much as the Roman Catholics, the “whore of Babylon.” Calvin ignored it altogether.

Religion. He, like Lawrence, wrote on the *Book of Revelation* but with a different angle. “Instead of being the darkest and most mysterious, it is the simplest and clearest book of the whole New Testament. For the present we must ask the reader to believe what we are going to prove by-and-by. That it was written in the year of our era 68 or January, 69, and that it is therefore not only the only book of the New Testament, the date of which is really fixed, but (it is) also the oldest book. How Christianity looked in 68 we can here see as in a mirror.” (Few New Testament scholars agree with him, though there are some).

“This crisis is the great final fight between God and the “antichrist,” as others have named him. The decisive chapters are XIII and XVII. “John” sees a beast arising from the sea which has seven heads and ten horns “and I saw one of his heads, as it were, wounded as to death; and his deadly wound was healed.” This beast was to have power over the earth, against God and the lamb for forty-two months (one half of the sacred seven years) ... “Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding *count the number of the beast; for it is the number of a man, and his number is six hundred three-score and six...* ... Irenaeus, in the 2nd century, knew still that by the head which was wounded and healed, the Emperor Nero was meant. He had been the first great persecutor of the Christians.”

Revelation was a theological treatise, but beneath its roaring and spiteful warfare was this truth – Rome was the evil enemy, and the “end of time” was to be the end of Rome through God’s actions. It was thus a book about justice in the 1st century for Christians, not the hereafter as is so often interpreted by churches then and now.

¹⁶ Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Oxford, 2009

¹⁷ Engels, *the Peasant War in Germany*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion*, Dover Publications, NY, 2008, p 98; reprinted from the Russian edition prepared by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the CC, CPSU, 1955, Moscow

Future. What do the results of a socialist revolution look like? In the 1891 postscript to “The Civil War in France” (1872) pamphlet, Engels said: “Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat;” to avoid bourgeois political corruption “[...] the Commune made use of two infallible expedients. In this first place, it filled all posts – administrative, judicial, and educational – by election on the basis of universal suffrage of all concerned, with the right of the same electors to recall their delegate at any time. And, in the second place, all officials, high or low, were paid only the wages received by other workers.”

CONCLUSION

Lawrence wanted splendor and the gorgeousness of the divine to replace the sick and sorry creed of Christianity. Mysticism is the common ground of all religion, but it is largely lost to the masses. It can be found again “breast to breast with the cosmos” and by using the religion interpreted by Lawrence of the Mexican and New Mexican native religions. “In the magnificent fierce morning of New Mexico one sprang awake, a new part of the soul woke up suddenly, and the old world gave way to a new.”¹⁸

Engels wanted justice and righteousness for the poor and oppressed of the world and helped found a movement to accomplish this. “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” is a slogan popularized by Karl Marx in 1875.¹⁹ Engels quite agreed and dedicated his life to fulfill this. It might even work today without the socialist utopianism.

It is important to add that mystical experiences in the Bible always led to issues of justice and righteousness. Here is the important link between Lawrence and Engels. God speaks to humans in times of crisis and need. It is an engulfing experience and deep speaks unto deep. Cf. Exodus 3, I Kings 19, Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1, Ezekiel 10, and also Luke 1 and Revelation 1. “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science (Einstein),” and add justice to this list, too.

Look them up and be enlightened in this day of the Coronavirus Crisis. Find the splendor. Search for justice. Life is more than fear of death; and justice for the poor and oppressed is more than capitalism. “Concern for man and his fate must always form the chief interest of all technical endeavors. Never forget this in the midst of your diagrams and equations.” (Einstein)

¹⁸ D H Lawrence, “Studies in Classic American Literature”, p.50, Cambridge University Press, (2003).

¹⁹ Karl Marx, Critique of the Gotha Program, 1875

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 D.H. Lawrence, "Studies in Classic American Literature," p.50, Cambridge University Press (2003)
- 2 Defined in various ways by historians and philosophers. "Desire" is fundamental to Eros, but it can result in the search for many things – the true, good, beautiful, other people, knowledge, God, etc.
- 3 D.H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent* [Quetzalcoat], Vintage International, 1992, originally published 1926
- 4 D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, The Cambridge Edition, ed Mara Kalnis, Intro by Melvyn Bragg, Granada, London, 1981, p 137
- 5 D.H. Lawrence, *The Sun*, in *The Collected Supernatural & Weird Fiction of DH Lawrence*, Leonaur, 2009, p1 67ff. Originally published ...
- 6 D.H. Lawrence, *Jimmy and the Desperate Woman*, in *The Woman Who Rode Away and Other Stories*, IC Gtesling, no date, p111ff. Originally published....
- 7 D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, The Cambridge Edition, ed Mara Kalnis, Intro by Melvyn Bragg, Granada, London, 1981, p 16
- 8 D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, Barnes & Nobel Classics, 2003 (originally published 1913), p 349. See Exodus 13.21-22
- 9 *Apocalypse*, op cit p 135
- 10 Albert Einstein – source unknown
- 11 *Apocalypse* p 46
- 12 *Ibid* p 143
- 13 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol I
- 14 *Ibid* p 173-4
- 15 Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Oxford, 2009
- 16 Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Oxford, 2009
- 17 Engels, *the Peasant War in Germany*, in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, On Religion*, Dover Publications, NY, 2008, p 98; reprinted from the Russian edition prepared by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the CC, CPSU, 1955, Moscow
- 18 D.H. Lawrence, "Studies in Classic American Literature", p.50, Cambridge University Press, (2003).
- 19 Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, 1875