

Theory/Practice

# NEWS & LETTERS

"Human power is its own end" - *Karl Marx*

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**Philosophic Dialogue**

## **Reflections on Hegel, Marx and Mao**

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Editor's note: We received the following response from a Chinese student to the new collection *THE POWER OF NEGATIVITY: SELECTED WRITINGS ON THE DIALECTIC IN HEGEL AND MARX*, by Raya Dunayevskaya. We welcome your participation in this ongoing dialogue.

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In Hegel's *PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND*, the stage of Spirit can help us understand the historical periods of the French Revolution, industrial capitalism, and state capitalism. This stage is featured by "spirit in self-estrangement," or as Hegel defined it, "the discipline of culture" (cited in *THE POWER OF NEGATIVITY*, hereafter *PON*, p. 39). Raya Dunayevskaya notes that it is full of "contradiction between the individual and society or between what we would call petty bourgeois individualism and the truly social individual" (*PON*, p. 39).

We might trace Marx's critique of "alienation," or "fetishism of commodities" in capitalist society from the description of spirit in self-estrangement by Hegel: "Spirit in this case, therefore, constructs not merely one world, but a twofold world, divided and self-opposed."

The dual character of labor, that is, concrete labor and abstract labor, results in the twofold character of commodities, in other words, use value and value. Because of this, human beings are separated from the products they produce. They are alienated from the objective world. What's more, they are alienated from other human beings because of the division of labor and large-scale machinery manufacture. Human beings become attachments of machines, and human relations are thingified. In contrast, commodities are endowed with life and idolized by humans. As a result, human beings are alienated from their essential being. Life is dehumanized and creativity suppressed. People cannot freely choose what they like to do. The world appears a prison full of uncontrollable necessity.

This is reflected in the Enlightenment of the 18th century. As Hegel commented, it managed to oppose faith and superstition, but the sphere of spirit was divided into a lower region--the actual world, and a higher region--"the ether of pure consciousness, raising itself above the first." He added: "This second world, being constructed in opposition and contrast to that estrangement, is just on that account not free from it" (cited in PON, p. 40). Superstructure is separated from and opposite to objective reality. Theory is separated from practice.

Later on, in the 20th century, because of this self-estrangement, Marxism could not be developed alongside the changes in the economic conditions of the proletariat and the capitalists. Labor bureaucrats positioned themselves high above the mass and the Communist Party was no longer the mediated result of socialist theory and the practical struggle of the proletariat.

### **Two Kinds of Subjectivity**

An extreme example of the self-estranged spirit is what Hegel calls the noble type of consciousness. Dunayevskaya connects this to the Chinese leader Mao Zedong, who rests his consciousness high above ordinary people and identifies his personal will with the will of the state. Hegel writes that this type of mind binds "the essential reality and self indissolubly together" and produces "a twofold actuality--a self that is truly actualized, and a state power whose authority is accepted as true" (cited in PON, pp. 40-41).

To Hegel, spirit in self-estrangement is due to the presence of a first negation without a second negation, resulting in the "dead form of the spirit's previous state" (cited in PON, p. 42). Enlightenment stuck to the opposite of faith and superstition, but failed to go on negating itself--the pure consciousness, the culture (superstructure) separated from objective practice. Dunayevskaya writes that it is the same with vulgar materialism and with "Trotsky's forced identification of nationalized property and 'workers' state'" (PON, p. 42).

In countries such as Russia and China, nationalized property did dig out the roots of capitalist exploitation by negating capitalist private property. However, controlled by the party and government, it was exposed to free appropriation by bureaucrats in power. In the abstract, the masses owned the property of the whole nation, but actually they were penniless. "Nationalized property" became an abstract idea and an empty slogan. Individual will was suppressed by the authorities in the name of the people. Communism turned into state capitalism and the enemy of humanism.

To Hegel, the second negation, which contains positive elements for renewal, is extremely important. If we stop at first negation, writes Hegel, revolution would become "merely the rage and fury of destruction" (cited in PON, p. 42). As Dunayevskaya pointed out, "if you have not faced the question of reconstruction on new beginnings but only destruction of the old, you have, therefore, reached only 'death--that achieves nothing, embraces nothing within its grasp; for what is negated is the unachieved, unfulfilled punctual entity of the absolutely free self'" (PON, p. 42).

Because revolutionists failed to address the question "What should we do after revolution," the "socialist" regimes collapsed in one country after another, including Russia and Eastern Europe. Others like China and Vietnam have actually converted

to state capitalism, with rampant bureaucratic corruption, while North Korea is ruled by authoritarian government.

This recent history makes us aware that the struggle for human freedom is never-ending. After we negate the external opposites, we need to negate the internal opposites inside ourselves. We need to negate our previous revolutions with a new revolution, to rediscover the "absolutely free self" from a higher starting point. Then the second negation will provide a positive basis for future negations.

### **What is Negativity?**

In his SCIENCE OF LOGIC, Hegel wrote: "The negativity which has just been considered is the turning point of the movement of the Notion. It is the simple point of negative self-relation, the innermost source of all activity, of living and spiritual self-movement, the dialectic soul which all truth has in it and through which it alone is truth; for the transcendence of the opposition between the Notion and Reality, and that unity which is the truth, rest upon this subjectivity alone. The second negative, the negative of the negative, which we have reached, is this transcendence of the contradiction, but is no more the activity of an external reflection than the contradiction is: it is the innermost and most objective movement of Life and Spirit, by virtue of which a subject is personal and free" (cited in PON, p. 20).

The dialectic of negativity is the absolute method. It enables us to keep pace, not only with the development of external objective reality, but also with internal subjective reality--the ever-changing concept of freedom, the ever-progressing human consciousness.

The goal of absolute negativity is to realize true freedom, which is reached in the final stage--Absolute Knowledge. At this stage, human beings will obtain the Absolute Idea, which is the unity of objectivity and subjectivity, the unity of thought and practice, and the mediated result. It is the stage when human consciousness achieves total freedom by grasping the absolute method--the dialectic of negativity. This stage is never the end of human history. Instead, it is the new beginning in the everlasting process of human development.

The Absolute Idea is a process of development, which goes from individuality to universality and from universality to individuality. All these stages can happen simultaneously. According to Hegel, the object is not just a "thing-in-itself," but the unity of the particular object and its universal notion. He wrote: "The object as a whole is the mediated result (the syllogism) or the passing of universality into individuality through specification, as also the reverse process from individual to universal through canceled individuality or specific determination" (cited in PON, p. 17).

Dunayevskaya wrote that Hegel concluded that "nothing in life or in thought has a beginning so simple as is imagined but that 'every beginning must be made from the Absolute, while every progress is merely the exhibition of the Absolute It is the Absolute only in its completion'" (PON, p. 19).

To Dunayevskaya, no matter whether it is "notion," "Spirit," or "absolute," it applied to the development of socialism: "So although we began with the universal of socialism and although we have seen socialism in the various phases of the [Paris]

Commune, the Soviets, the CIO, it is not yet IT for it can be it 'only in its completion.' The new society will not be until it is; now we see only intimation, approximations, but it is nevertheless all around us, in the lives of the workers and in the theory of the party, so until the solution of the conflict and the abolition of the division (between mental and manual labor), we are back to stages of development" (PON, p. 19).

Based on nationalized property, the so-called socialism in Soviet Union and China was actually state capitalism. Normally, only Communist Party members could hold high positions in the government. Although congress representatives were supposedly elected from the masses, they were actually appointed by party officials of higher positions. In contrast to the bottom-to-top system of democratic election, this top-to-bottom system of official appointment made any supervision by another power or party impossible.

The party was no longer "the Other," or "the mediated result of the three layers," which incorporated and served as a medium between the notion of socialism and the practical struggle of the proletariat (PON, p. 17). The party was no longer "what it is by its relationship to the proletariat outside" (PON, p. 17).