

Raya Dunayevskaya: Reflections for the Future

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As someone who has worked in the tradition of Raya Dunayevskaya's Marxist-Humanism for most of my adult life, it is hard to make a brief intervention, even in limiting myself to two specific contributions of this formidable thinker/activist. First, I want to talk about her contribution to our understanding of Hegel, Marx, and dialectics and second, her work on the intersectionality of race, class, and the struggle against capital.

From the 1940s onward, Dunayevskaya concerned herself with the recovery of Hegel's dialectic as such for later generations of Marxists. When she began this work, at first alongside the Caribbean Marxist and culture critic C. L. R. James, the notion of a Hegelian Marxism was at best the position of a tiny minority. From the academic left (this was before McCarthyism) to the Trotskyist parties in which she worked, dialectics was at best just a slogan, and a kind of scientific positivism with a Darwinian bent reigned. Philosophical ideas were a reflection of material reality, it was said, and any form of idealism ran the danger of taking us back to religious obscurantism, or worse, fascism.

But with the end of the Second World War, and the revelations about the Nazi death camps and the Stalinist forced labor camps, as well as the toll visited on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by U.S. nuclear weapons, new types of radical thought came to the fore. Alongside the class struggle and economic development, there was now more interest on the Left in the dignity of the human person, or as the young Marx put it, the social individual. Existentialists – albeit in too subjectivist a fashion -- attacked the determinism of orthodox Marxism. The Frankfurt School put forth anti-technocratic interpretations of Marxism, albeit in a form that had little to say to the working class and other oppressed groups. And Dunayevskaya as an incipient Marxist-Humanist put forth a form of Hegelianized Marxism that challenged technocratic state-capitalism, East and West.

Over the next four decades, Dunayevskaya developed a distinctive concept of dialectic. First, she translated Lenin's 1914 Hegel Notebooks. And although the academic left blocked publication in the U.S., she used this revolutionary take on Hegel as a springboard into Hegel's *Science of Logic* and *Phenomenology of Mind*. By 1953, she had penned her Letters on Hegel's Absolutes, where she added into the mix Hegel's little discussed (even to this day), *Philosophy of Mind*. These 1953 Letters challenged all previous interpretations – from Engels onward – of Hegel's Absolute as a closed totality with conservative implications. In fact, she broke completely with the Engelsian distinction between system and method in Hegel's thought, arguing that Marx had critically appropriated Hegel's dialectic as a whole. She concluded these letters with her own critical appropriation – here directly against Engels – of the final paragraphs of Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind*, which are also the end of his system as elaborated in the three-volume *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*.

Hegel ends his system with a 3 syllogisms about Logic, Nature, and Mind, which bring in categories like the self-thinking idea and the self-knowing reason, this in the chapter on absolute mind. To Dunayevskaya, these kinds of Hegelian concepts spoke to the new

social consciousness that had emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, wherein rank and file workers, ethnic minorities, youth, and women were no longer letting others decide for them the pathway of liberation.

At the same time, other aspects of Hegel's absolutes spoke to something else, the absolute development of capitalism into the twentieth century form of totalitarian state-capitalism, imbued with the stench of death and destructiveness everywhere it went. This picked up a thread from Marx's concept of the absolute in *Capital*, where he had referred, in a discussion of the "Absolute General Law of Capitalist Accumulation," to class polarization amid brutal exploitation. But Hegel's absolutes – as Dunayevskaya stressed in her reading of the *Science of Logic* – also contained the deepest contradictions of all rather than a closure. All of this led her to write in the original introduction to her first book, *Marxism and Freedom* (1958), that "we live in an age of absolutes, -- on the threshold of absolute freedom out of the struggle against absolute tyranny." This not only evoked the anti-fascist resistance movements, but also the new social consciousness that had emerged in the U.S. and elsewhere by the 1940s.

To be sure, Dunayevskaya as a Marxist rejected conservative Hegelian writings like the *Philosophy of Right* or the embarrassing discussions of Africa in the *Philosophy of History*, but she saw elsewhere in Hegel's work the root of all dialectic in the sense of revolutionary dialectics. As she wrote in *Philosophy and Revolution* (1973), referring to works like Hegel's *Science of Logic*, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and *Philosophy of Mind*:

"Precisely where Hegel sounds most abstract, seems to close the shutters tight against the whole movement of history, there he lets the lifeblood of the dialectic – absolute negativity – pour in. It is true Hegel *writes* as if the resolution of opposing live forces can be overcome by a mere thought transcendence. But he has, by bringing oppositions to their most logical extreme, opened new paths, a new relationship of theory to practice, which Marx worked out as a totally new relationship of philosophy to revolution. Today's revolutionaries turn their backs on this at their peril" (pp. 31-32)

This, I believe, is a legacy to us today, at a time when so many different radical thinkers – from Negri to Habermas to Foucault, not to speak of old-time Engelsian positivists – are all united in telling us to avoid at all costs the revolutionary dialectic of Hegel.

The second theme I want to bring out tonight concerns race, colonialism, and the struggle against capital. I have explored these issues in Marx's thought in my recent book and I wish to underline tonight how my *Marx at the Margins* is rooted in this aspect of Dunayevskaya's thought. Again from the 1940s onward, and again initially alongside C. L. R. James, Dunayevskaya explored the specifically U.S. class system, which had always functioned along with the additive of race. Later, in her *American Civilization on Trial* (1963) and other works Dunayevskaya showed how racism had undermined progressive class-based movements again and again in U.S. history, from the later Populists of a century ago to the American Federation of Labor (AFL). At same time, and here in contradistinction to some forms of whiteness studies and other similar perspectives, she also pointed to crucial junctures at which white labor began to overcome its racism under the impact of the Black struggle, whether during the some phases of the Populist movement or the later Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) during the 1930s. At every stage of her life, from her teenage years in the 1920s working with the Communist Party's weekly paper here in Chicago, the *Negro Champion*, to the end of her life, when in 1986 she wrote a new introduction to a Marxist-Humanist study of Frantz Fanon, she stressed that in U.S. history, one constant was "Black masses as vanguard" in terms of social progress. This led her to examine movements not always considered to be connected to socialism and Marxism, like the Abolitionists of the

nineteenth century or the Garvey movement of the 1920s. Always, however, she was interested in the possibility of coalescence between Black and white labor, but never on the basis of putting aside the struggle against racism in order to forge a superficial and false form of class unity.

This dimension of Dunayevskaya's thought is also seen in her interpretation of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Fanon, and other thinkers in the Marxian tradition. She stressed again and again the central importance of Marx's writings on the U.S. Civil War, where he critically supported the North, castigating those who saw no difference between the North and the South while also attacking Lincoln's failure to conduct the war as a revolutionary struggle against slavery. Not only that. She wrote as well of how the Civil War in the U.S. impacted the structure of *Capital*, Vol. 1, inspiring Marx to add a chapter on the working day, the one in which he wrote in ringing tones that "Labor in the white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a Black skin."

Then, at the end of her life, Dunayevskaya delved into Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*, those studies at the end of his life on gender, colonialism, and clan or tribal social forms and their displacement by class structures. These Notebooks – which I am helping to edit in a fuller version for the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* with a group of international scholars -- covered a wide range of societies, from ancient Rome to India and Russia, and from Algeria to colonial and precolonial Latin America, as well as the North American Iroquois. She placed these late writings of Marx at the center of her *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (1982), not in order to create an Althusserian type of division between the late and early Marx, but in order to illuminate Marx's lifelong concern with the impact of capitalist penetration upon non-capitalist lands and on the ensuing new forms of resistance to capital and colonialism. She also did so in a manner that pointed to serious flaws in Engels's deterministic work covering some of the same issues, *Origin of the Family*. As Dunayevskaya put it in the *Rosa Luxemburg* book:

“Marx's hostility to capitalism's colonialism was intensifying. The question was how total must be the uprooting of existing society and how new the relationship of theory to practice. The studies enabled Marx (Marx, not Engels) to see the possibility of new human relations, not as they might come through a mere ‘updating’ of primitive communism's equality of the sexes, as among the Iroquois, but as Marx sensed they would burst forth from a new type of revolution” (p. 190).

These late writings of Dunayevskaya, themselves on the late Marx, offer us important vantage points from which to move beyond currently fashionable rejections of Marx's thought as hopelessly Eurocentric. They give us a Marx for the twenty-first century.