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Negativity, dialectics, and desire

by Ben Watson

Editor's note: This review of Raya Dunayevskaya's *The Power of Negativity: Selected Writings on the Dialectic in Hegel and Marx*, edited by Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (Lexington, 2002) first appeared in *Radical Philosophy*, 116, November/December 2002.

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Born in Ukraine in 1910, Raya Dunayevskaya emigrated to the U.S. in her teens. By the age of 20 she was active on the U.S. Left, her ability to read Russian giving her an advantage in interpreting the contradictory messages emerging from revolutionary Russia. She served as Trotsky's secretary in 1937-38, but broke with him over the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939. Trotsky stuck to his analysis of Russia as a "degenerated workers' state"; Dunayevskaya would not swallow the idea that a workers' state, however degenerate, could ally with a fascist one.

Her subsequent investigations revealed exploitation by the bureaucrats and extraction of surplus value from labour; she and her comrade C.L.R. James therefore defined the USSR as "state-capitalist." Having formed the Forest-Johnson Tendency, named after their clandestine pseudonyms in the (American) Socialist Workers Party, they also abandoned the Leninist concept of the vanguard party. They then dissolved their Tendency, since tendencies only have meaning within a party's factional fights.

Dunayevskaya's economic analyses of Soviet statistics about Five Year Plans in 1942 run parallel to those circulated in 1948 by Tony Cliff, founder of the (British) Socialist Workers Party. Both used Marxist categories to diagnose capitalist relations of exploitation in Russia. However, reacting against the "materialist" economism of the Stalinists, Dunayevskaya argued her case by calling for a return to Marx's philosophy. To distinguish it from both pre-1914 social democracy and communism after Lenin's death and Trotsky's defeat, Dunayevskaya named her philosophy "Marxist-humanism." Lenin and the Russian revolutionaries of 1917-23 were the sole exceptions in her universal condemnation of "post-Marx Marxists" (including Engels and Lukács).

Her involvement with Hegel was not casual, and, despite harsh words about academics, she spoke at Hegel conferences and engaged non-Marxist Hegelians in lively correspondence. Nevertheless, her conviction that no one else had understood the last three syllogisms of *Science of Logic*, and that these provide an opening into a new epoch for humanity, can sound slightly crackpot, especially when repeated in talk after talk, letter after letter. Her "revelation" of 1953, when she grasped the significance of Hegel's Absolute, is returned to again and again with an obsessiveness worthy of Philip K. Dick. But--again like Dick--this obsessiveness is infectious, and at times moving.

Dunayevskaya's belief that philosophy must step out into the world unmediated by politics or concrete demands struck James as hopelessly unrealistic, and they parted ways. What had been a weapon for criticizing Stalinist residues in Trotskyism--revival of Hegelian dialectics--now became the core of Dunayevskaya's thought. Although influential within the New Left of the 1960s, she eschewed both academic and party positions until her death in 1987. There are tributes on the back of this volume from academics such as Douglas Kellner and Susan Buck-Morss, but she was proudest of her correspondence with worker-militants like Charles Denby and Harry McShane. By the 1980s her small circle of supporters resembled a cult: but, cult or not, it has provided excellent editors--the introduction and footnotes here are wonderfully informative, conscientious and accurate.

This collection allows us a glimpse of Dunayevskaya in action: how she attempted to communicate her new philosophy without the usual Marxist mediations of party, votes, leadership, theoretical journal, internal bulletins, newspaper and propaganda.

The idea of taking Hegel straight to the masses is not as absurd as it sounds. When she spoke to students, auto workers and anti-war activists in Tokyo in January 1966, or to a similar audience at the Black-Red Conference in Detroit in January 1969, or after the Soweto revolt in South Africa in December 1976, her words have a conviction and clarity which is hair-raising. She may not have cited facts and figures about overtime rates and pay deals, which peppered the speeches Cliff gave to mass meetings of workers in the early 1970s, but she transmits an equally revolutionary message. Perhaps the publishers were thinking of the anticapitalist movement and the publishing success granted Naomi Klein, Susan George and Toni Negri when they issued this collection.

Like her classic *Marxism and Freedom* (1958), this book is centered on Lenin's aphorism that a whole generation of Marxists had failed to understand Capital because they hadn't understood Hegel's *Science of Logic*. Dunayevskaya then caps this with the idea that Lenin himself hadn't gone far enough into Hegel because he stopped at the transition of Logic into Nature (Practice), rather than going on to the Absolute Idea (Freedom). Unfortunately, such a direct translation of philosophy into politics is only likely to convince those who have already discovered in Hegel and Marx a basis for collective political action.

Despite recent attempts by star intellectuals such as Zizek and Jameson, discussion of Lenin and dialectics without the democracy and decision-making of a Marxist party seems unreal and ungrounded. As the meetings of her followers attest, Dunayevskaya's ideas are mainly attractive to ex-members of various Marxist groups, united in their bitterness about past attempts to lead and orient them in the struggle. In other words, Dunayevskaya's polemics rely upon the very political practices and structures she declares she has transcended.

Dunayevskaya traces the American roots of Marxism, not to the General Congress of Labor in Baltimore in 1866, but further back to the abolitionist movement and the slave revolts which led to the Civil War. This is an excellent way of exploding the reformist recuperation of Marx's writings on the U.S. However, despite a plethora of good moments, the book as a whole lacks force. Away from her factional fights and debates, Dunayevskaya can appear to lack a strategic vision of the object of attack. Anticapitalism seems worlds away from her obsessive readings of Hegel, and orthodox Trotskyism too small and frail a boat--already riddled with holes, shot from both inside and outside--to rock with revolutionary conviction.

Dunayevskaya's reading of Hegel is persuasive because it pours real history and political experience back into his categories. The manner in which she and James wrestled with

Hegel was a breakthrough for radical philosophy, rescuing some of the most difficult texts in Western philosophy from the professionals.

Dunayevskaya argues that the "incomprehensibility" of Hegel is political in itself, due to his insistence that concepts are not inert counters in an eternal game of logic, but fluid, self-moving "notions" with their own tendencies. History and change are therefore the substance of thought, not its corruption, as Plato believed. Lenin made the point that this fluidity, when not sophistry and subjectivism on the part of the thinker, results from the fact that notions reflect objective developments in the world.

The unabashed and exaggerated manner in which Dunayevskaya revelled in Hegelianism has something of the poet about it. Towards the end of her life, she used phrases like "the Idea itself thinking." This echoes the idealist climaxes of Hegel's great works, which have the soaring self-congratulation of prayers and wish-fulfilling dreams, a vertigo eagerly sought by poets. Beginning with Heine and on to Mayakovsky and Breton, authentic Marxism has always had a fruitful relationship with poets--but it also has a tradition of criticizing such formulations as "idealist."

James and Dunayevskaya were correct to see that disinterest in Lenin's ruminations on the Greater Logic were part of Stalinist suppression of the speculative, subjective side of Marxism, and that this side is crucial. Like Walter Benjamin's image of official communism's "historical materialism"--hiding away the dwarf of theology inside a chess-playing robot--the claim that Marxism is positive science ("economics") rather than dialectical humanism has authoritarian implications. It also means that religious or mystical or idealist fads (psychotherapy, existentialism, Nietzscheanism, cultural studies...) come to occupy the "soul" vacated by its soulless materialism. The relationship of radical subjectivity and endless desire to capitalism is a concrete issue that Marxism ignores at its peril. As Dunayevskaya says, "We can no longer, as did Lenin, keep 'our' philosophic notebooks private."

One frustration of Dunayevskaya's thought is that a certain puritanism--always a curse of the American Left--appears to prevent her relating to the French tradition of Charles Fourier, surrealism and the Situationists. Like her, these revolutionaries also talked about "new passions," and the Situationists actually managed to turn Hegelian concepts into accessible slogans. Such a tradition might help to translate the extreme subjectivism of climactic Hegelian rhapsody into more materialist, Marx-friendly terms.

When Hegel quotes Schiller at the end of Phenomenology of Spirit ("from the chalice of this realm of spirits/ foams forth for Him his own infinitude"), the Freudian sees the autarchic sex act, or masturbation, but, unlike the radical feminist or Stalinist politico, does not immediately follow this up with moralistic outrage. In his "avant-pulp" novels Stewart Home reminds readers of the affinity between Sadeian sexual fantasy and revolutionary thought. A Home-style sexual-reductionist interpretation of transcendentalism not only bursts the Hegelian religious afflatus; it also begs questions only pro-sex communism--proletarian and feminist--can answer.

"Rediscoveries" are the wellspring of Marxism. John Bellamy Foster recently made a strong case for a socialist ecology by reviving Marx's doctoral dissertation on Epicurus. Likewise, in order to do battle with the post-Deleuzean philosophers of "desire," the new wave of punk writers represented by Home are surely right to revive the scurrilous irreligion and anti-moralism of The Holy Family and The German Ideology (whose forgotten invective versus

Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* now reads like a prophylactic sally against Nietzsche and poststructuralism).

Dunayevskaya's return to dialectics and subjectivity was an essential contribution to the Marxist recovery of the whole person travestied by speciality of thought. However, deprived of the confrontational frankness of the Freudian Left, an insistence on Hegelian subjectivity easily becomes transcendent and unbelievable--in short, religious.

The advantage of the psychoanalytic interpretation over the conventional Marxist charge of "idealism" is it is not driven by repression or moralism. Even if it uses terms which are anathema to Hegelians (and probably to many "post-Marx Marxists"), the pro-sex faction can explain, even celebrate, Hegel's underlying impulse, rather than invoke a taboo. When Wilhelm Reich called orgasm "cosmic plasmatic sensation" he gave it an "infinitude" no materialist can argue with. By reminding us that philosophical writing is a substitute for the ineluctable needs of the human body, a sexual interpretation restores the reader's sense of human equality (this was the thrust of Sloterdijk's revival of Diogenes in *Critique of Cynical Reason*). A surrealist Hegel would provide just the ally Dunayevskaya needs, and could open out into a revolutionary interpretation of dreams, fantasy and the unconscious--and a critique of their exploitation by religion and the culture industry.

However, as shown by her curt dismissal of Freud in 1973 (*Women's Liberation has declared him sexist, so we can bin him, it is declared in Philosophy and Revolution*), Dunayevskaya would not be interested. Her direct line between Hegelian philosophy and contemporary political activism meant ignoring the ensemble of revolutionary ideas suppressed by Hitler and Stalin and World War II: the concrete manifestation of the "spirit" of freedom she talks about.

How was the family restored after the worldwide assault on bourgeois respectability in the 1920s? The banning of Freud went together with the attack on dialectical philosophy, working-class organization and women's rights. Although she corresponded with Marcuse and Fromm, it was always about philosophy, never psychoanalysis. (For all his failings over the characterization of the new ruling class in Russia, Trotsky was far more alert to the potential of psychoanalysis.) Dunayevskaya's uncritical embrace of new social movements--always superior in her eyes to the "post-Marx Marxists," who are portrayed as a crew of unhip grumblers, ever "fazed" by the new--finally threatened to unravel her Marxism completely.

This flaw (in Trotskyist jargon, "movementism" or "tail-endism") became glaring in late Marxist humanism. It was pinpointed in 1984, when Dunayevskaya said of participants in revolutions: "Whether or not they were conscious of actually being the history-makers, they were exactly that." Everything Dunayevskaya had said in *Marxism and Freedom* about Absolute Mind and Freedom revolved around consciousness. Every human being--capitalist, housewife or cop--"makes history" simply by participating in society: the point of Hegel's "what is rational is real," and Marx's uncovering of surplus value, is that they introduce the measure of truth and consciousness into politics and economics. By saying that the revolutionary masses can make history unconsciously, Dunayevskaya reduces the proletariat to the level of the bourgeoisie, participants in history who blindly create new conditions. Her enthusiasm for social movements finally betrays her own philosophy: moralism replaces enlightenment.

All this means that for the anticapitalist searching for revolutionary theory, *The Power of Negativity* is not the place to start (unless one isolated "Lecture in Japan on Hegel", 1966;

"Presentation to the Black-Red Conference", 1968; and "Logic as Stages of Freedom, Stages of Freedom as Logic, or the Needed American Revolution", 1969; and the correspondence with C.L.R. James between 1949 to 1951, the high point of both their thinking--or had these pages excerpted by a canny pamphleteer). The earlier Marxism and Freedom is free of the repetition which makes The Power of Negativity's references to Hegel's Absolute Idea sound like a mantra. It is a more powerful and convincing exposition of Dunayevskaya's ideas.

Nevertheless, for socialists, The Power of Negativity will provoke soul-searching about party instrumentalism and freedom of thought. Dunayevskaya's brusque, unpretentious and exclamatory epistolary style is exhilarating. She articulates tenets about freedom and subjectivity that are well established in the cosmopolitan working class, though they may not yet have become ensconced in their vanguard organizations at the level of theory. Unfortunately, radical philosophy unsupported by political party, academia or celebrity is a thin--if occasionally head-spinning--broth to live by. If one balks before the exaggerations and fancies of Dunayevskaya's later pronouncements, it is because one wishes to make actual her promise that we have entered a new era.

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Consciousness and revolution: A response to Ben Watson

by Dave Black

Ben Watson's critique of Dunayevskaya's *The Power of Negativity* centers on the nature of "consciousness," in particular a statement by her in 1984 on "the actual participants in revolution": "Whether or not they were conscious of actually being the history-makers, they were exactly that."

In the next sentence (which Watson doesn't quote), Dunayevskaya referred, as example, to the milkmaids who initiated the Paris Commune in 1871 when they raised the alarm against the bourgeois government's attempt to remove the city's artillery defences. But to simply point out that "of course" the milkmaids weren't conscious of the fact that their action would overthrow the government would not be enough to answer Watson's charge that Dunayevskaya was "saying that the revolutionary masses can make history unconsciously. Her enthusiasm for social movements finally betrays her philosophy." His critique calls for a serious philosophic response.

Watson, as a good anti-Stalinist, is of course aware of the denigration of "consciousness" as "subjectivity" during the epoch, post-1917, of counter-revolution-within-revolutions. Dunayevskaya, in 1964, wrote that "two kinds of subjectivity characterize our age of state-capitalism." One was represented by Mao Zedong ("no regard for objective conditions...as if a party of the elite that is armed can both harness the energies of men and 'remold their minds'"). The other kind was the "second type of subjectivity" which rested on the Hegelian "transcendence of the opposition between Notion and Reality"; a subjectivity that had "'absorbed' objectivity, that is to say, through its struggle for freedom it gets to know and cope with the objectively real" (*The Power of Negativity*, p. 157).

A year later (1965) however, she found this class divide (between petit-bourgeois and proletarian) to be incomplete and told her Japanese audience that this "second subjectivity" had to be broken into two kinds of revolutionary subjectivity: firstly, what the workers were going to do anyhow (whether the theoreticians listened or not); and secondly, "what theoreticians must do" who have listened (p. 144).

Because historical development negates all of the forms that have gone before (such as the vanguard party), these two second types of subjectivity must also be the two sides of the ONE "second negativity" which creates the new society. It is precisely these insights which explain why, as Watson puts it, "she was proudest of her correspondence with worker-militants like Charles Denby and Harry McShane."

Watson offers an eclecticism that wants to humanize the vanguard party project by "turning Hegelian concepts into accessible slogans" and promoting a "revolutionary interpretation" of "the unconscious." He expresses "frustration" at Dunayevskaya for not "relating to the French tradition of Charles Fourier, surrealism and the Situationists."

"Tradition" however is itself at the mercy of the power of negativity. A "surrealist Hegel," which Watson thinks "would provide just the ally Dunayevskaya needs" for entering a "new era" of revolutionary thought, was precisely what the Situationists rejected. Guy Debord, whilst praising the surrealists' assertion of the "sovereignty of desire and surprise," at the same time pronounced that their "idea of the infinite richness of the unconscious" was the "error at the root" of their project.

Dunayevskaya's critiques of council communism and Lukács's theory of the "reification" of consciousness (chapters 1 and 12) in my view shed much light on Debord's attempt to fuse the two.*

(I cannot incidentally see in Stewart Home's cold-blooded porno-punk fiction anything that "might help to translate the extreme subjectivism of climactic Hegelian rhapsody into more materialist, Marx-friendly terms," let alone "[burst] the religious afflatus" of Hegel's Absolute Knowledge.)

Watson charges Dunayevskaya with an "uncritical embrace" of "new social movements" over and against the "crew of unhip grumblers" who sail the sinking ship of "post-Marx Marxism." Clearly though, judging by her writings throughout this book (covering from 1949-87), her "embrace" was never uncritical. For if mass movements were beyond criticism there would have been no need for her to write any of her books in the first place or for Watson to review them.

When Watson says "Unfortunately, radical philosophy, unsupported by political party, academia or celebrity is a thin--if occasionally head-spinning--broth to live by," he does identify the challenge facing Marxist-Humanism. After all, in the history of post-Dunayevskaya Marxist-Humanism, there have been those who could not accept her determination not to allow philosophy and organization to exist side-by-side in separate "enclaves." But to "choose" between the "Practical" and "Theoretical" fails to realize that both tend to fall apart in separation.

At the end of her life, in 1987, Dunayevskaya, in continuing to develop the "philosophic moment" of 1953 on Hegel's Absolute Idea, categorized the dialectics of philosophy and organization as the "ground and roof" of her and her colleagues' project. The 2003-2004 Perspectives of News and Letters Committees, addressing the error of treating philosophy as only theoretical and organization as only practical, asks:

"Why shouldn't we exercise [the theoretic power of philosophy] in class struggles, in Black struggles, in the anti-war movement, in youth and Women's Liberation struggles. In a word, why not project Marxist-Humanist philosophy organizationally as the power that is both the form for eliciting from the masses their thought and projecting Marxist Humanist perspectives to them?"

Watson's readable and provocative review of *The Power of Negativity* is most welcome, but the question remains: "why not."

*See "Art, Reification and Class Consciousness in the Situationist International," by David Black, *Hobgoblin 4*, at:

<http://members.aol.com/THEHOBGOBL/Hobgoblin4.html>