

# Philosophy on the barricades

[Issue: 127](#)

Posted: 25 June 10

**Stacey Whittle**

*Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (eds), **Raya Dunayevskaya: The Power of Negativity—Selected Writings on the Dialectic in Hegel and Marx** (Lexington Books, 2002), £16.95*

The relationship of Marx and historical materialism to Hegelian dialectics has long been a source of argument amongst Marxists and non-Marxists alike. The great value of Raya Dunayevskaya's work, and of these selected writings, is to leave no shadow of doubt that Marx's entire work (despite allegations of an "epistemological break" between his early "philosophy" and later "economic" work) is indebted to Hegel's historical and philosophical dialectic. Her aim is to demonstrate the relationship of the Hegelian revolution in philosophy to Marx's philosophy of revolution.

At historical crisis points Marxists have returned to the theories of the great bourgeois philosopher Hegel to help understand the contradictions of the age. Lenin looked to Hegel's *Logic* in the midst of the First World War and the degeneration of Second International Marxism and realised, in both theory and practice, the necessity to seize the historical moments and leaps that "break with gradualness". Likewise, Dunayevskaya searched for the radical creative subjectivity that Hegelianism emphasises and which Stalinism had crushed in what she considered to be an age of absolute contradiction; on the one hand demonstrated by the counter-revolution "from within the revolution" in Russia and on the other the explosion of resistance to the logic of capital from below, especially within the Stalinist regimes.

The post-Stalin revolts from within the self-proclaimed "Communist world", notably the 1953 East German uprising, signalled the dialectical "movement from practice" that had brought Marx's philosophical humanism onto the world stage. Dunayevskaya sought to unite revolutionary practice with the "movement from theory" that she believed her theoretical work, expressive of a "new continent of thought", could provide. The events of 1953 and the Hungarian uprising of 1956, with its spontaneous organisation of workers' councils and decentralised forms of power, symbolised for her the moment at which Hegel's concept of the Absolute Idea (for her, nothing short of absolute liberation and freedom) appeared on the horizon. Dialectical practice alone was not enough for Dunayevskaya. She considered the failure of previous revolutionary situations (notably 1968) to be a subjective one to deepen the philosophy of revolution.

Dunayevskaya attempted to address the crises of capitalism, and "actually existing socialism" through Hegel's concept of absolute negativity. Absolute negativity is the dialectical "negation of the negation" that was central to Dunayevskaya's philosophical comprehension of the processes of history.

Readers of this journal will be aware of the central importance of the theory of state capitalism to the International Socialist tradition. Dunayevskaya developed a theory of state capitalism with CLR James around 1942 when they were part of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, a split from the US Socialist Workers Party after it broke away from the American Socialist Workers Party. This was at a time when the Hitler-Stalin pact rang the death knell of Trotsky's own interpretation of Stalinist Russia as a "degenerated workers' state". Dunayevskaya's elucidation of state capitalism took a particularly philosophical form. In her analysis, the Russian Revolution failed to develop to absolute negativity because it was aborted at the first negation—the negation of private property which Marx referred to as "vulgar communism" in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844 (which she was the first to translate into English).

Demonstrating the counter-revolution through this philosophical, Hegelian prism is enlightening insofar as it points to a successful revolutionary situation being the unity of the objective and subjective development; for the revolutionary action of the negated proletariat to not "stop short" at the abolition of private property relations but to build a truly human society that does away with the divisions of capitalism and the regulation of life according to socially necessary labour time. However, the focus on internal contradiction driven by a philosophical worldview explicitly ignores the central role of external, material pressures faced by the young revolutionary Soviet republic.

It is not clear why recognition of the power of negativity demands that we must grasp Hegel's Absolute Idea, often interpreted by Marxists as a radical subjectivism absorbing objectivity, as necessary to comprehend the crisis of our age. For Dunayevskaya, the Absolute signified freedom that must be realised through the transformation of reality. But in her quest to assert subjectivity, understandable given the historical and political context of her original writings, she seems to demand that we equate philosophy with revolution. This remains problematic since she acknowledged Marx's comprehensive development (rather than mere application) of Hegel's dialectic into a materialist theory necessitating the total transformation of society and history, and of the "revolution in permanence".

But Dunayevskaya's great insight into the power of negativity, the potential to overthrow capitalism that resides within its contradictions, is inspiring, as is the breadth of the subjects covered in this book. One can be reading about Hegel's Absolute one minute and Rosa Luxemburg's theory of spontaneity the next. The format of the text varies from speeches to correspondence with the likes of Herbert Marcuse and Harry McShane and demonstrates Dunayevskaya's determination to "bring philosophy to the barricades".

Despite an insightful introduction by the editors, the book lacks an overall coherent structure and as a result remains complex insofar as it fails adequately to express Dunayevskaya's central arguments (no matter how many times the selected texts repeat the mantras of "new continent of thought" and the "absolute idea as new beginning"). As such it ought to be read alongside her self-titled "trilogy of revolution" (*Marxism and Freedom, Philosophy and Revolution* and *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*).