

"Marxism and Freedom" After Sixty Years, For Yesterday and Today



It is the sixtieth anniversary of Raya Dunayevskaya's *Marxism and Freedom*, a work both of its time and ahead of its time.

First published in 1958, at the height of the Cold War but not long after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, it was one of a number of writings in the period that put forth a democratic, humanist, and revolutionary Marxism, both against the Russian Stalinist system and against the "liberal democratic" capitalism of the United States and Western Europe. This was the same period when E. P. Thompson broke away from the British Communist Party over Hungary, and when Edgar Morin and others formed the Arguments Group in France, both of them reacting against the brutal Russian intervention in Hungary.

However, Dunayevskaya had broken with Stalinism some thirty years earlier and gone on in the 1940s to write economic analyses of the USSR as a totalitarian state-capitalist society. For her, therefore, the newness of Hungary 1956 lay not so much in any proof of the reactionary, anti-worker character of the Russian and East European Stalinist regimes as in the proof it offered that (1) contra Orwell and Arendt, totalitarianism could never extinguish the struggle for human liberation, and (2) contra the Hungarian Revolution's liberal supporters, the emergence of workers councils and of the Marxist intellectuals of the Petofi circle showed that a third way was possible—a socialist humanism that was entirely

different from both Stalinism and Western liberalism. As she wrote with respect to the workers councils, "When all said that everything was over, the Hungarian Workers Councils sprung up. ... They began to fight in the factories, which they were using as their places of refuge. ... The workers evolved new ways of fighting, both on the job and when they walked out on strike" (256).

Another mass movement of the period, the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956 in Alabama, also figured prominently in *Marxism and Freedom*. In her treatment of what is now seen as an epochal event that launched the civil rights movement, Dunayevskaya stressed its grassroots character, rather than the leadership of the newly prominent Martin Luther King Jr. She noted that the movement had no visible hierarchy, but was governed by mass meetings held as often as three times per week. She also singled out the fact that in boycotting the buses for over a year, the Black working class had to arrange its own informal transportation networks in the face of threats and repression from the state and the Ku Klux Klan.

In declaring, "Clearly, the greatest thing of all in this ... spontaneous organization was its own working existence," she was pointing to its revolutionary potential (281). For that phrase, "its own working existence," was the same one that Marx had employed in *The Civil War in France*, his seminal analysis of the Paris Commune: "The great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence" (www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm). So too for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the movement that launched over a decade of revolutionary activity on the part of African Americans and their allies, much of it based upon grassroots political activism and organizing rather than hierarchical forms of organization.



Raya Dunayevskaya

Dunayevskaya also singled out the new stage reached by the U.S. labor movement in the period just before the book appeared. On the one hand, workers were increasingly distancing themselves from the newly powerful labor bureaucracy, which stifled union democracy and had tied labor to the state ever since World War II. On the other hand, at a time of Fordist high wages in some major industries, the new stage of production represented by automation became a dividing line between rank-and-file workers and the political and economic establishment. And as she saw it, that establishment included not only the corporations, the government, and the liberal social scientists who advised capital and the state from the universities, but also the labor bureaucracy itself. For their part, rank-and-file workers feared and opposed automation both because it was creating mass unemployment and because it was heightening the alienated labor in their workplaces. Workers, Dunayevskaya held, were demanding nothing less than the end of the division between mental and manual labor. She summed this up with a reference to the young Marx: "Thus, the workers, the American workers, made concrete and thereby extended Marx's most

abstract theories of alienated labor and the quest for universality” (276).

To Dunayevskaya, these three movements, the Hungarian workers councils, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the stirrings of rank-and-file labor against both automation and the labor bureaucracy, revealed a new stage of opposition to the rule of capital. This new opposition was emerging not from organized parties of the left or from inspiration from leftist intellectuals, but from the grassroots participants’ own life experience, from practice. Implicitly referring not only to Stalinism, social democracy, and liberalism, but also to orthodox Trotskyism, Dunayevskaya concluded with regard to these kinds of new social movements, “In truth, while the intellectual void today is so great that the movement from theory to practice has nearly come to a standstill, *the movement from practice to theory, and with it, a new unity of manual and mental labor in the worker, are in evidence everywhere*” (276; here and below, emphasis in original).

This “movement from practice to theory” was the underlying theme of *Marxism and Freedom*. It captured the spirit of an era that was to see mass social movements, many of them marked by spontaneity, in the 1960s and since. It was obviously a repudiation of the top-down politics of both social democracy and what is usually termed the Leninist vanguard party. In this sense, it anticipated not only the 1960s, but also events like the wave of revolutions and protests that have impacted so many countries since the Arab revolutions of 2011, from the Indignados in Spain to Occupy Wall Street in the United States, and from Gezi Park in Turkey to Nuit Debout in Paris.

However, while Dunayevskaya believed firmly in the creativity of spontaneous, sometimes leaderless movements, she did not, either in *Marxism and Freedom* or in her writings afterwards, ever argue that the Marxist theoretician was therefore irrelevant or a mere bystander. It was, she held, a movement from practice to theory, not a spontaneous movement that had

no need for Marxist theory. What she did argue was that the greatest revolutionary thinkers had absorbed into their philosophical perspectives the creativity of the movements from below of their times, while at the same time offering those movements some theoretical and political direction. And this had organizational implications as well. It differentiated Dunayevskaya from her erstwhile U.S. colleague, the great Afro-Caribbean Marxist C.L.R. James. Despite many commonalities with Dunayevskaya, James hewed to a more spontaneist position, as did other contemporary groups with positions similar to Dunayevskaya's, like *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and later, the Italian *operaïstes*. As Frédéric Monferrand notes in his well-researched new preface to the 2016 French edition, "Thus, where C.L.R. James called after 1955 for the abolition of 'the distinction between party and mass,' the author of *Marxism and Freedom* never seems to have really renounced the need to form a revolutionary organization relatively autonomous from the social movements" (22).

With those kinds of questions in mind, let us look briefly at some of the key theoretical junctures in *Marxism and Freedom*.

The chapter on Hegel and the French revolution that begins the book is heavily indebted to the anarchist thinker Daniel Guérin for its account of the *sans-culottes* as part of a creative movement from below, to the left of the Jacobins, that conceptualized and fought for a popular democracy:

Democracy, thus, was not invented by philosophic theory nor by the bourgeois leadership. It was discovered by the masses in their method of action. There is a double rhythm in destroying the old and creating the new which bears the unmistakable stamp of the self-activity which is the truly working class way of knowing. This, in fact, was the greatest of all the achievements of the great French Revolution—the workers' discovery of their own way of knowing. (30-31)

In her brief account of Hegel, a real gem of compression that

illuminates the truly revolutionary aspects of Hegel's philosophy, Dunayevskaya stresses the impact of the French Revolution—and its aftermath—on the German inventor of the modern form of dialectics. She also notes how the young Hegel singled out the alienated condition of the modern factory worker but could not yet discern—because it was too early—the yearning for a creative and non-exploitative form of labor that was to imbue the modern working-class movement in its most revolutionary moments. That would have to wait for Marx. What Hegel did discern in his published work—and here the influence of the French Revolution was obvious—was that the quest for freedom and emancipation marked the entire course of human history. Additionally, in seeing the social world not only as substance, but also as subject, Hegel paved the way for the Marxian concept of the collective revolutionary subject.

According to Dunayevskaya, Hegel also elaborated, above all in his *Absolute Idea*, which he saw as the unity of theory and practice, the dialectical relationship between the social and the individual:

For in Hegel's *Absolute* there is embedded, though in abstract form, the full development of the *social* individual, or what Hegel would call individuality "purified of all that interferes with its universalism, i.e., freedom itself." Here are the objective and subjective means whereby a new society is going to be born. That new society, struggling to be born, is the concern of our age. (39)

For Dunayevskaya, the key here was not so much the rather banal notion that individuals must become social to fully realize themselves as individuals. Her point centered on something slightly different: how the quest for individual self-development and freedom could link up with broader epochal movements for human emancipation in such a way that both were deepened, in a truly dialectical relationship. Thus, when Rosa Parks sat down on that bus in Montgomery, Alabama,

and defied the system of racial segregation, her quest for individual emancipation managed to link up with the universal in such a way that it helped touch off a whole era of revolutionary radicalism.

Dunayevskaya noted as well that Marx drew his concept of the negation of the negation from Hegel, whom he praised in 1844 for having uncovered "the dialectic of negativity as the moving and creative principle" (34). At the same time, Dunayevskaya critiques the retrogression into statism in the later Hegel, while also maintaining the enduring influence of the German idealist on Marx. Finally, the discussion of Hegel turns toward the Stalinist rejection of Hegel, especially his concept of negativity.

With Marx, Dunayevskaya stresses the fundamental continuity of the young Marx of 1844 with *Capital*, not only in Volume 1, but also in Volumes 2 and 3. I know of no other serious analyst of Marx who swam so easily in both the humanist/dialectical aspect—alienation, fetishism, dialectic, and so on—and in concepts like the tendential decline in the rate of profit as the foundation of Marx's theory of crises and depressions.

In its original 1958 edition, *Marxism and Freedom* contained as an appendix the first published English translations of two of the most important of Marx's 1844 Essays, "Private Property and Communism" and "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic." The theme of Marx's revolutionary humanism continues through one of Dunayevskaya's four chapters devoted to his magnum opus, "The Humanism and Dialectic of *Capital*, Vol. I." In the 1844 Essays, Dunayevskaya sees Marx as having put forth his own version of the dialectic, as having not only "stood [Hegel] on his feet," but also as having separated himself from "vulgar communism" (85), which Dunayevskaya traces back to some of the communist sects of Marx's own time, albeit with a clear contemporary target, the vulgate of Soviet Marxist-Leninism. Here she connects philosophy and economics, in the sense that vulgar communism sought to change property relations but not

production relations, not the actual daily life of the worker: Marx was strongly “opposed to anyone who thinks that the ills of capitalism can be overcome by changes in the sphere of distribution” (59). As for the Russian Stalinist ideologists, they focused on the merits of state property and they “spend incredible time and energy and vigilance to imprison Marx within the bounds of the private property versus state property concept” (63). This was also an implicit critique of classical Trotskyism, with its focus on nationalized property as the dividing line between capitalism and a workers’ state.

Throughout, Marx is presented as a revolutionary activist as well as a thinker, even during his supposedly cloistered British Museum years when he immersed himself in political economy. Not only was he an activist as well as a thinker, but world events and his engagement with them decisively shaped his greatest theoretical work, *Capital*. Here the kinds of themes alluded to at the beginning of this essay—the new forms of emancipatory struggle found during the 1950s in the Hungarian revolutionaries, Alabama Black activists, and rank-and-file workers—emerge as central to the book’s underlying theoretical premises.

Thus, the decisive impact of the U.S. Civil War on *Capital* Volume 1 is elaborated not just as political background, but as having had a decisive theoretical importance. Dunayevskaya’s chapter covering these issues begins with Marx’s applauding from afar the incipient slave insurrection he was hoping for in the wake of John Brown’s attack on Harper’s Ferry. Marx not only differed with Engels on the potentially revolutionary character of the Civil War, but he also strongly attacked the non-revolutionary Lincoln’s reluctance to issue an emancipation proclamation. In addition, Dunayevskaya stresses Marx’s strong support, in his letters and journalism, for the British workers who sided with the North even as the British establishment took the opposite position. In a remarkable display of proletarian

internationalism, those workers kept up their support even when told that a British intervention on the side of the South might quickly end the war and the cotton blockade that had led to mass layoffs in the textile industry. She also notes how language about race, class, and the fight for the eight-hour day found its way into Marx's text, as in this often-overlooked passage from *Capital*:

In the United States of America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the Black it is branded. But out of the death of slavery a new life again arose. The first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours agitation, that ran with the seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New York to California. (84)

Thus, the dialectics of race and class was no mere sideshow, but a crucial aspect of the struggle for the emancipation of labor.

But there were other theoretical stakes here as well. Dunayevskaya also makes the argument that the very structure of *Capital* changed as a result of Marx's engagement with the U.S. Civil War. Based upon a study of the early drafts of *Capital*, she concludes that it was only after he became engaged with the Civil War that Marx added an entire chapter on "The Working Day," apparently completed as late as 1866. This chapter is one of the book's most crucial, not because it exposes the oppression of the worker, which many had done before, but because it shows how the lengthening of the working day constituted the breaking point that produced the modern labor movement. *Capital's* chapter on the working day contains the most detailed treatment of working-class resistance to capital of the entire book, as it chronicles the struggle for a shorter working day, first in Britain, and then in France, and then in the United States, where it became intertwined with the dialectics of race and class.

But Marx is not only describing, but also prescribing. For he is suggesting in this chapter that, short of actual proletarian revolution, the fight for a reduced working day challenges capital in a fundamental way, more than that for higher wages. Moreover, this was something that Marx put forward in the First International, helping to place it on the agenda of the working class across Western Europe and North America. Turning to our own times, I would like to note that in recent decades, the French working classes have been carrying out the fight for a shorter working day, but in isolation from other highly developed economies like Britain or the United States, where the issue has lain dormant, or worse. As a result, French workers have been sometimes forced to retreat.

Dunayevskaya conceptualizes a similar process concerning the relationship of the Paris Commune to *Capital*. Following the framework of Marx's *Civil War in France*, she outlines what he saw as the Commune's revolutionary features: its grassroots democratic character, its destruction of a modern bureaucratic state, its development of worker self-rule in some of the factories. Dunayevskaya added a point not stated explicitly by Marx concerning the leading role of female workers, milkmaids, in touching off the insurrection early in the morning of March 18, 1871: "As in every real people's revolution, new strata of the population were awakened" (95).

Next, Dunayevskaya argues that several important formulations in *Capital* were added only after the Commune. The last version of *Capital* Volume 1 that Marx personally vetted before it was published was the French edition, issued in serial form from 1872 to 1875. Although it was translated by Joseph Roy, Marx's correspondence shows that he went over every page and reworked many parts of the text. Few except specialist scholars are aware that the 1867 version of *Capital* was quite different from the text we know today. Most importantly, the first chapter did not exist in its present form. Only after the

Paris Commune did Marx reorganize the book, creating for the first time a separate first chapter ending with a discussion of commodity fetishism. Some of the material on fetishism was already there in 1867, but some was added after the Paris Commune. This was because the Commune had illustrated in concrete form what Marx for years had been referring to as free and associated labor. Dunayevskaya argues that after 1867 Marx moves the focus in the discussion of commodity fetishism from "the fantastic form of appearance," wherein human relations took the form of relations between things, toward "the *necessity* of that form of appearance," given that the reification of human relations was "in *truth*," the form taken under capitalism of "what relations between people *are* at the point of production" (100).

This is not only an example of revolutionary events influencing and deepening Marx's theorization of capitalism, but it is also an example of Marx carrying out some of his most original theoretical labor under the impact of the Commune. In carrying out this work, he developed further a book that aimed not only to reflect, but also to shape the consciousness of the working class, in order for it to carry out the struggle for its self-emancipation more effectively. And it was not Marx's fault that post-Marx Marxists, beginning with Engels, virtually ignored the crucial section on commodity fetishism until the 1920s.

Dunayevskaya's discussion of V.I. Lenin as thinker and as revolutionary takes a similar form. The early Lenin's notion of the vanguard party as elaborated in 1902, in *What Is to Be Done?*, is seen as undergoing modifications under the impact of the creativity and self-organization displayed by the working class in 1905 and 1917. Moreover, in anticipation of many recent discussions by Lars T. Lih and others, that early form of vanguardism is shown to have been not that different from the prevailing concept of organization in the Second International. Thus, Lenin in 1902 "merely brought to its

logical conclusion Karl Kautsky's formulation" to the effect that workers on their own could achieve trade union but not socialist consciousness, with the latter having to be brought to them by radical intellectuals (179).

World War I undermines Lenin's support for Kautsky and the other chief theoreticians of the Second International, leading him to embark upon, for the first time, the elaboration of general and global, rather than only Russian, Marxist perspectives. Was this a result of a steadfast adherence to earlier revolutionary principles or a new departure for Lenin? Dunayevskaya holds more to the second possibility, underlining Lenin's in-depth study of issues he had largely avoided up until then: Hegel and dialectics, imperialism, and the state and revolution.

One major departure, still controversial even today, is Dunayevskaya's elaboration of a philosophical break in Lenin's thought as a result of his 1914-1915 notebooks on Hegel's *Science of Logic*. This meant an implicit repudiation of his crudely materialist and reductionist 1908 treatise on Marxist philosophy, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Singling out revolutionary Hegelian concepts like self-movement and contradiction, Lenin also embraces aspects of Hegel's philosophical idealism as superior to crude materialism, writing, "Intelligent idealism is nearer to intelligent materialism than is stupid materialism" (207). Moreover, in an implicit self-critique, Lenin holds that one cannot understand *Capital* without having studied Hegel's *Logic* and that "consequently, none of the Marxists for the past half-century have understood Marx!" (171). Henri Lefebvre translated Lenin's notebooks on Hegel and introduced them to the French public over two decades earlier, but he did not, until 1959, acknowledge a break in Lenin's philosophical thought after 1914. Dunayevskaya, on the other hand, had developed her concept of such a break in a dialogue with C.L.R. James in the 1940s. (I discuss Lefebvre, Althusser, James, Dunayevskaya,

Lukács, and other commentators on Lenin's relation to Hegel in my 1995 book, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*.)

As Dunayevskaya saw it, Lenin took up the development of the capitalist economy into its monopoly stage, and the concomitant emergence of imperialism, soon after his study of Hegel, in part on the basis of the new dialectical insights he gained there. At this point, Lenin became dissatisfied with Rudolf Hilferding's non-dialectical presentation of monopoly capital, first because it underplayed how competitive capitalism was transformed. Dunayevskaya writes that for Lenin, it was the result of a "development through contradiction, through *transformation into opposite*" (208).

Second, Lenin taxed Hilferding, and even some of his Bolshevik comrades like Nikolai Bukharin, for not addressing changes brought about by imperialism at the subjective level, that of the working people in both the imperialist lands and the colonies. In terms of the working class at home, imperialism led to a deep internal contradiction, with a small part transforming into an aristocracy of labor that benefited from colonial exploitation. As Lenin saw it, that stratum also formed the core of those elements of the working class that supported World War I. It is a concept that Dunayevskaya connected to racial segmentation within the U.S. working class.

In terms of the colonies, imperialism unleashed modern, progressive nationalist movements. Here Lenin singled out the Easter Uprising in Ireland of 1916, in the middle of the war and up to that point the most serious blow against imperialism and the war anywhere in the world. Ireland was the harbinger of a new form of consciousness and struggle that came to be called national liberation movements. In supporting the Irish uprising, and in polemicizing with less supportive or even hostile class-reductionist perspectives from Karl Radek and Leon Trotsky, Lenin underlined the dialectical underpinnings of his position, referring to the Irish events as part of the

“dialectics of history,” wherein colonized nations fighting for their national emancipation can take the lead, moving ahead of the international working class in the struggle against imperialism, and ultimately, capitalism itself.

Here again, Lenin’s originality lay not only in grasping new subjective developments like the development of the labor aristocracy and of the national liberation movements, but also in conceptualizing the relationship of those forces to the overall working-class movement. He incorporated the peasantry as well, especially in his discussions of major countries in the Global South like colonial India and semi-colonial China.

Whatever his flaws as a Marxist thinker and revolutionary leader, which have been pointed out by other revolutionary thinkers ever since Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin’s two major insights—on Hegel and dialectics, and on imperialism and national liberation—are still fruitful theoretical resources today. For Dunayevskaya, Lenin’s Hegelian Marxism was more attractive than that of Lukács or Marcuse because he reached political and economic conclusions on the basis of his dialectical investigations. He was therefore able to elaborate a dialectical theory of the emergence of imperialism and of the contradictions within it, most prominently its giving the impetus to national liberation movements across the colonial and semi-colonial world. Lenin’s great sensitivity, as well, to national and ethnic oppression inside large countries like Russia was an important and related insight that he was to develop in terms of groups like African Americans in the years following his Hegel notebooks and his book on imperialism.

Dunayevskaya took from Hegel, Marx, and Lenin two conceptual threads: on the one hand, a certain type of dialectics of revolution, and on the other hand, a sensitivity to new social forces and movements with revolutionary potential. These two threads of analysis enabled her to conceptualize a new form of capitalism, automated state capitalism, in which workers faced the state, capital, and their own union bureaucracy, and where

new social movements like the Black movement in the United States were emerging. At the same time, events like Hungary 1956 showed not only the bankruptcy of the Stalinist regimes, but also that the working people and youth under those regimes shared similar aspirations with those in radical social movements across the world.

While *Marxism and Freedom* was published six decades ago, it still speaks to us today, when grassroots social movements for radical change have covered the globe in a way not seen since the 1960s, and yet at the same time, the economic and political contradictions of capitalism are more glaring—and ominous—than at any time since the 1930s. This unprecedented situation compels Marxists of the twenty-first century to rethink our old categories, especially those inherited from either social democracy or Stalinism.

Footnotes

This article is based on a presentation given in Paris on the occasion of the reissue of Raya Dunayevskaya's *Marxism and Freedom* by Éditions Syllepse; it was published in French, in [*Entre les lignes entre les mots*](#), on January 19, 2018.