

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

This excellent volume offers a unique collection of essays, correspondences, drafts, presentations and papers that effectively span Raya Dunayevskaya's later years after the break with Trotsky (1938) and C.L.R. James (mid-1950s). The documents are clearly presented and are well-chosen, offering a valuable insight into the mind of this radical thinker. Hudis and Anderson's introduction proffers a clear focus for the volume on the idea of dialectical negativity and situates this body of work within the whole of Dunayevskaya's life and thought.

The volume is divided into five distinct periods and themes beginning with Dunayevskaya's unique contribution to Marxist-Humanism before going on to her studies of dialectics in Part II. This second part offers a careful analysis of the concept of dialectics that conjoins Hegelian and Marxian themes. It also contains a series of correspondences with Herbert Marcuse which I found to be the most interesting part of the book, as it reveals the differences in approach to dialectics between the Frankfurt School and the Socialist-Humanists. Parts III and IV give particular emphasis to Hegelian-inspired notions taken up in Marx's so-called 'early humanism' and also by Georg Lukács. The final part offers various papers and letters that look to revolutionism and the question of '*what comes after*' in terms of such matters as organisation, youth, and women's liberation. It is appropriately titled "The Changed World and the Need for Philosophic New Beginnings", a question that was of utmost concern to Dunayevskaya with the

seeming triumph of Thatcherism and 'Reaganomics' before her death in 1987.

The concept that is central to Dunayevskaya's thought – and which is the primary focus of this volume – is the Hegelian notion of Absolute negativity. It has connotations similar to recent readings of Hegel by Maker and Williams regarding the 'double dialectic',⁶ and by Berthold-Bond, who has shown that Hegelian dialectical negativity does not result in a "closed ontology".⁷ It would appear that this interpretation of an open-ended dialectic immanent to Hegel's *Logic* is growing in acceptance, and is a welcome development in political philosophy as it represents the opportunity to break with those readings that have reduced dialectics to a Marxist husk, dismissing it as being, at best, dogmatic and, at worst, a closed ontology ushering in a totalising metaphysics. This volume represents a key opportunity for the radical Left to reclaim the fundamental perspective and process of the dialectic and channel it towards emancipatory ends. For too long, dialectics has been misunderstood and its potential unrealised. Dunayevskaya's thought offers dialectics as a means to push forward the horizons of political possibility, to overcome what the editors of the volume rightly identify as the 'crisis of the imagination' in contemporary politics (xxv).

The notion of Absolute negativity is taken from Hegel's *Science of Logic*, where he goes beyond pure or abstract negativity and calls for absolute negativity, which not only rejects the old but is in fact the basis for a new development or a forward movement.⁸ Hegel rejects the notion – so often charged against him – of an Absolute that is *oppositionless*. Rather, at the conclusion of this work Hegel affirms the Absolute Idea as nothing less than 'absolute liberation', the point at which humanity moves towards its freedom.⁹ As is well known, Dunayevskaya is readily accepting of Hegel's idealism (she is avowedly "not afraid" either of the "'system' of Hegelian philosophy, or of the idealism of the Absolute Idea" [109]), but what is important in this volume is not her defence of idealism but her argument that

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6. Philip T. Grier, ed., *Identity and Difference: Studies in Hegel's Logic, Philosophy of Spirit, and Politics*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2007, chapters by William Maker ("Identity, Difference, and the Logic of Otherness") and by Robert R. Williams, ("Double Transition, Dialectic, and Recognition").
 7. See Daniel Bethold-Bond, *Hegel's Grand Synthesis, a Study of Being, Thought and History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 136, cited in Dunayevskaya, xxiv.
 8. G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (A.V. Miller Trans.) (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1969), 113. See also Dunayevskaya, xviii-xix.
 9. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 824, 843.

absolute negativity offers new beginnings rather than closure; it offers to negate existing conditions of *unfreedom* and to create new ones of 'liberation'.

While the volume contains many illuminating insights, one of the key contributions is the 'Dialogue on the Dialectic' (Chapter 6), which presents part of the correspondence between Marcuse and Dunayevskaya from 1956–1963. While it would be worthwhile also to see Marcuse's replies, Dunayevskaya's letters alone reveal important insights regarding the need to develop and move toward "*new political forms*". What Dunayevskaya is arguing for is something "concrete" regarding the "'new passions and new forces' for the establishment of the new society" (97). It is this humanism that she seeks to ground using the dialectic, and she looks to the African and Hungarian Revolutions as contemporaneous events that manifest Hegel's "*absolute liberation*" in Absolute negativity (102) – events she returns to later in the volume in "*Liberation Today*" (Chapter 11). These events are the deepening struggles on the world scene that mark the "dividing point" of our epoch for "*free, individual, total liberation*" (103).

Dunayevskaya's key insight here is linking the concept of dialectics to the waxing and waning of revolutionary periods: for Hegel, the failure of the French Revolution to move to freedom and self-liberation; for Marx, the whole period between 1848 and 1859 (104f); and for Lenin, the evolution from his "*vulgar empiricism*" in 1905 to his re-engagement with Hegel culminating in the *April Theses* of 1917. The point for Dunayevskaya is to hear "*today's masses*" in their own terms but also through the philosophy of Hegel; that is, *dialectically*. It is in exploring this nexus between Hegel and Marx that Dunayevskaya makes her unique contribution to present-day struggles. As she put it, "Each generation must reinterpret Marxism for itself" (93), and she offers great insights into doing just that. She admitted in one of her letters to Marcuse that she needed to return to Hegel to find a new relationship of theory and practice to suit the epoch (107). It is an admission that I think we should all share.

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