

Dialectics of liberation

Kevin B. Anderson and Russell Rockwell, eds, *The Dunayevskaya–Marcuse–Fromm Correspondence, 1954–1978: Dialogues on Hegel, Marx and Critical Theory*, Lexington Books, Lanham MD and Plymouth, 2012, 269 pp., £49.95 hb., £21.95 pb., 978 0 73916 835 6 hb., 978 0 73916 836 3 pb.

Raya Dunayevskaya died in 1987 aged 77, but her ideas remain alive and to-be-lived-by today, a permanent reproach to thought's accommodation to an intolerable present. Dunayevskaya inspired and inspires a special enthusiasm, evidenced here by the meticulousness of the editing: no passing reference to text or event is left without a footnote. The scholarly apparatus is not there to obscure the original writing, but to make sure no prior knowledge – of history, of politics, of 'isms' – is taken for granted. The result is that, in its footnoted entirety, the book becomes an ideal introduction to the agonistic drama of twentieth-century life and politics: global conflicts are pursued right down to the *minutiae* which make and break friendships. This is entirely in the spirit of Dunayevskaya, the revolutionary activist who believed that Detroit auto-workers fighting speed-

ups and mechanization on the shop floor were better equipped to understand world history than professional intellectuals.

'Kicked down a dirty staircase' in 1928 for daring to suggest to some Young Communists that they should perhaps read some Trotsky before condemning him, Dunayevskaya refused to be intimidated. A skilled typist, she wrote to Trotsky in Mexico offering her services as a secretary. He accepted. This role gave her the best Marxist teacher on the planet, a prestigious place in international politics, and a pistol. But Dunayevskaya outgrew Trotsky. In his 1933–35 *Notebooks*, Trotsky wrote: 'Lenin created the apparatus. The apparatus created Stalin.' Yet he never awoke to the completeness of Stalin's counter-revolution. Working with C.L.R. James, Dunayevskaya

concluded that Russia was *state-capitalist*. The manner in which Russia waged World War II was exactly like Nazi Germany and the Allies: conquest of territory via armed bodies of men organized to prevent political consciousness. In 1943 and 1944, both the US State Department and the Soviet embassy in Washington strove to prevent the publication of Dunayevskaya's translation of an article in a Soviet publication (*Under the Banner of Marxism*) which argued that the law of value still applied under 'socialism', along with a commentary in which she stated:

Foreign observers who have carefully followed the development of the Soviet economy have long noted that the Soviet Union employs almost every device conventionally associated with capitalism. Soviet trusts, cartels and combines, as well as the individual enterprises within them, are regulated according to strict principles of cost accounting ... Essential to the operation of Soviet industry are such devices as banks, secured credit, interest, bonds, bills, notes, insurance, and so on.

Dunayevskaya was blowing a whistle on the entire coming spectacle of postwar politics, the 'struggle' between the Free World and Communism. In fact, as Philip K. Dick showed in *The Penultimate Truth* (1964) and Charles Levinson in *Vodka-Cola* (1979), the Cold War was the perfect environment for exploitation of workforces in both East and West, and Dunayevskaya is scathing about intellectuals who took sides: 'since our state-capitalist age has the two nuclear giants fighting to the end, it compels those intellectuals who do not wish to base their theory on what the proletariat does, thinks, says, to attach themselves to one or the other pole.' The same thing, of course, has happened to many intellectuals with shaky (or non-existent) Marxism during the War on Terror.

Dunayevskaya fought tooth and nail against the prejudice (Stalinist and academic) that Hegel and Marx were 'too difficult' for workers to understand. In her obituary of Herbert Marcuse, she wrote that 'far from the proletariat having become one-dimensional, what the intellectual proves when he does not see proletarian revolt, is that *his* thought is one-dimensional'. Her understanding of Marx was *non-pareil*. A letter of 11 October 1957, where she explains to Marcuse how social developments in the American Civil War influenced the writing of *Capital*, is a stunning splice of political economy, historical analysis and scholarship. Both Marcuse and Fromm, members of the famously erudite Frankfurt School, used her to source quotations in Marx. But mere displays of intellect repelled her. Dunayevskaya believed that philosophy – that is,

truth – was the *sine qua non* of political activism. She dived into Hegel, not in order to prove she could juggle concepts, but because she was convinced that if you didn't grasp his dialectic, you'd make mistakes (in Stalin's case, mistakes with atrocious results). The notion of philosophy as a set of random 'moves' in a timeless void – turns on the dance floor – is binned: there are clear steps in the advance of thought, and if you miss these, you fall.

She didn't read German. She read her Marx in Russian (she emigrated from the Ukraine to the United States as a child) and her Hegel in English. Her readings of Hegel are nevertheless incredibly excited and vivid. Compared to run-of-the-mill Hegel scholarship, it is as if someone had slapped a Marvel super-hero comic down on top of some mouldering leather-bound volumes. In 1974 at the Hegel Society of America, her paper 'Hegel's Absolutes as New Beginnings'

almost got a standing ovation; they were falling asleep over their own learned theses, and here I was not only dealing with dialectics of liberation – Hegel as well as Marx tho the former was, by his own design, limited to thought – but ranging in critique of all modern works from 'their' Maurer to Adorno's Negative Dialectics which [is] so erudite they didn't quite dare attack until they found I was merciless in critique.

Dunayevskaya rages against Adorno for abandoning Hegel's 'negation of the negation' (which in *Capital* is concretized as the proletariat), dismissing his proposal that Auschwitz represents absolute negativity as a 'vulgar reduction'.

It is hard to summarize Dunayevskaya because she is always driving at the same point, the moment of human liberation when official bourgeois society (and its official opposition), with its pretexts and lies and corruption and humbug, collapses like a house of cards. In their introduction, the editors insert Dunayevskaya back into the known quantities of various ideologies and 'isms', and it is hard work: you miss the freshness and self-deprecating humour of her correspondence. An improvisatory, open-ended quality illuminates all her writing: Dunayevskaya doesn't say things because she ought to or because she's afraid of criticism. Like Marx, Dunayevskaya entirely lacks the *deference* which fogs up academic philosophy. She'll debunk before you wink. Marcuse finds this attitude disturbing, and in his very first letter warns her about the dangers of 'anti-intellectualism', calling her image of the common people 'romantic'. However, she started the correspondence with Marcuse because she believed her work on a grassroots socialist paper in

Detroit had borne fruits that any intellectual would find interesting. Three years later, Herbert Marcuse wrote a preface to Dunayevskaya's *Marxism and Freedom*, his famous name adding to its lustre (although in his last paragraph he demurs from Dunayevskaya's faith in the working class; and in the edition prepared for publication in Britain she replaced his preface with one by Harry McShane 'of Glasgow Trades Council').

Marcuse is usually described as someone who studied with Heidegger, became a member of the Frankfurt School and supported radical movements in the 1960s. In her obituary (included here as an appendix), Dunayevskaya finds the real cause for his radicalism: she points out that 'as a young man completing his military service in Germany, he was active in the Soldiers' Council in Berlin [in 1919]. Marx's philosophy of liberation and the revolutionaries, Rosa Luxemburg–Karl Liebknecht, were the real determinants of Marcuse's life.' Because she herself learned from activists, Dunayevskaya rejected the academic notion of philosophy as a set of bookish 'choices' (she called this 'one-dimensional'), instead registering the impact of political events and possibilities on



the mind. Dunayevskaya wrestled with Marcuse over Hegel, especially his argument that Hegel's Absolute Idea was simply proof of the separation of mental and manual labour in the 'pre-technological' stage of history. This kind of historicism – the argument that once, long ago, we could think certain thoughts, but not any more – is familiar today in the postmodernism of Fredric Jameson and T.J. Clark, who maintain that revolutionary ideas like Dunayevskaya's are 'unthinkable' today. What they mean is unthinkable for *them*. Marcuse's use of 'technology' (not a Marxist concept, since it is historically indeterminate) is an unfortunate residue of his Heideggerianism. Associating with those whose lives were totally involved with new technology

(car workers) enabled Dunayevskaya, by contrast, to test ideas for their relevance without imposing historical schemas. Conservative thought hypostatizes a certain staging of history and beheads an idea if it doesn't conform; Dunayevskaya's dialectic of liberation, on the other hand, allows infinite speculation to source itself from flashes in the past. She is loyal to Hegel's insistence on the freedom of the mind, whereas Marcuse comes across like a tetchy bureaucrat with a rulebook.

Dunayevskaya broke with Marcuse after the publication of his *Soviet Marxism* (1958), which she felt concurred in the Cold War lie that the USSR was a 'Marxist' state. For all his Hegelianism, Marcuse lacked the dialectics to see how Communism could become the *opposite of itself*. Whereas the revolutionary can understand the murderous role played by the Stalinists in the Spanish Civil War or by a Mao or a Ho Chi Minh – elimination of 'Trotskyists' the first task in establishing a hierarchical state capitalism – global politics remained a tragic puzzle for Marcuse. There was a slight reconciliation towards the end, and Dunayevskaya's obituary is frank and moving.

Dunayevskaya wrote more letters, and longer ones, to Marcuse than she received in return (which is fine, because her company is so much more enjoyable than his!), but at least we can read what he wrote. Here, due to copyright reasons, we have to make do with editorial summaries of Erich Fromm's letters. Fromm has not had a good press. A writer of psychoanalytic bestsellers, his reasonable but flat prose does not have the spike of Adorno or the deftness of Marcuse. He's probably the most neglected member of the Frankfurt School. However, during the period of correspondence with Dunayevskaya, having neglected Marx in the past, he was moving leftwards. Since he had no previous baggage, he could get on board the state-cap train, and in turn opened up windows on Freud and the unconscious for Dunayevskaya.

At the recent *Historical Materialism* conference in London, the International Marxist-Humanist Organization (stemming from Dunayevskaya's own News & Letters collective in Detroit) organized a fringe meeting in a Kings Cross pub about three female revolutionaries: Helen MacFarlane, Rosa Luxemburg and Raya Dunayevskaya. The meeting was good-humoured, informed and creative. Activists who attended were encouraged to speak. This tone was in sharp contrast to the accusation and anguish which emerged when

Marxism and the ‘woman question’ was debated at the official conference. In other words, Dunayevskaya solved problems which still plunge the rest of the Left into trouble and strife. She’s a Leninist, but her Lenin is completely different from the ‘hard man of politics’ we know from bourgeois and Stalinist accounts (she cites him *criticizing* vanguardism, saying that workers and peasants were the best judges of Party careerists; her expositions of Lenin’s reading of Hegel in 1914, the basis of C.L.R. James’s classic book *Notes on Hegel*, are mind-spinning). As anti-capitalism and student protest and UK Uncut outdo our own ‘Leninist’ organizations for originality and daring, Dunayevskaya’s critique of orthodox Leninism becomes more and more relevant. Looking at the list of enthusiasts for Dunayevskaya (a list which includes Adrienne Rich, Harry McShane, Egon Bondy, Ralph Dumain, Sheila Lahr and Dave Black) makes this writer, for one, want to join up.

The response of the ‘pragmatic’ or ‘realist’ left politico to Dunayevskaya’s politics of complete liberation is to say it’s ‘impractical’. Yet in 1976, three years after the brutal suppression of Hortensia Allende’s husband’s regime in Pinochet’s coup, her secretary was in touch with

Dunayevskaya about a Spanish translation of her *Marxism and Freedom*: Dunayevskaya was by then a Marxist of international standing. The delusions of grandeur emanating from the Trotskyist ‘Fourth International’ have made it a laughing stock, but if the current crisis of capitalism is going to receive an effective internationalist response, Dunayevskaya’s Marxism – advanced, unsectarian, non-vanguardist,



impassioned, utterly unimpressed by the cavorts of spectacular politics, democratic, imaginative, undogmatic, funny, irreverent, earthy and *truly liberating* – will be the best place to start.

Ben Watson