

The Intersections of Race and Class-Based Social Movements under Fordism

Rediscovering a Neglected Form of Critical Social Analysis



From left to right; Raya Dunayevskaya, C. L. R. James, and Grace Chin Lee, photo taken during the mid 1940s

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Abstract: When critical scholars coming from different academic disciplines, such as sociology, gender studies, or Black studies, meet and discuss today, discussions sometimes take the form of whether recognition of particular identities or redistribution of material resources is of most importance. In this thesis, my aim is to explore resources that could contribute to moving beyond this framing of the question, which inevitably implies that one always would need to step back in order for the other to move forward. I recently came across the works of the Johnson-Forest tendency from the 1940s in the US, which combines social dialectics with a Marxist analysis in which particular identities are at the very center of their analysis and considered the basis for revolution. There is not much available literature on the Johnson-Forest tendency, and therefore I will devote this thesis to a detailed investigation of their works. I will start by outlining biographical and contextual background to their works. Then I will take a closer look on some of their writings on the relationship between race and class, and then look at hitherto unexplored correspondence between the members of the Johnson-Forest tendency, which one of the members later claimed was of major importance for their development. Finally, connecting back to the discussions mentioned above, and in light of the current #BlackLivesMatter-demonstrations, I will evaluate what relevance the works of the Johnson-Forest tendency have for an analysis of the relationship between race and class today.

Keywords: Race and class, Johnson-Forest tendency, Hegelian Marxism

Popular Science Summary: In the immediate post-WWII period, really when sociology as a field of academic study established in the US, there was a tendency inside the Trotskyist movement that started to elaborate on a Marxist framework in which race and the anti-racist struggle was central to their analysis. This group avoided a class reductionist position as they did not deny that racism take on a life of its own and extends beyond economics. But they also argued that racism in capitalist society cannot be understood without specifying its economic roots. Moreover, the primary sources they drew on was quite unique at that time. Hegelian dialectics, Marx, and an original reading of Lenin was their main sources of inspiration. Few others in the US, except Herbert Marcuse, whom one of them later had a serious correspondence with, found a similar fascination for these works. This group called themselves the Johnson-Forest tendency after its two leading intellectuals. The members of the Johnson-Forest tendency never earned any long time academic positions, and, perhaps for that reason, their work never gained any wider recognition.

Today, academic discussions on the relationship between race and class often take place in traditions dominated by an influence of the heritage from structural and post-structural traditions. In comparison, the works of the Johnson-Forest tendency comes out as quite original. Due to their dialectical analysis, rooted in Hegel, they were able to reveal, not only what they were against, but also what they were for. Their discussions on alternatives to capitalism was therefore not abstract speculations, but actually grounded in a philosophic logic.

Furthermore, in light of today's anti-racist uprisings, which has turned even more focus to the question on the nature of the relationship between race and class, the works of the Johnson-Forest tendency on this issue is of interest as it potentially could contribute with inspiration to a new analysis. In this thesis, I will examine whether this is the case or not.

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Introduction

In the mid 1940s, a small dissident group formed inside the American Trotskyist movement. They critiqued the leadership, whom they thought were incapable of both practically addressing the racism that existed in society and in the movement, and of theoretically grasping the crucial role of the Black workers' struggle. This group called itself the Johnson-Forest tendency after the pseudonyms of two of its leading theorists. "Johnson" in the Johnson-Forest tendency was C. L. R. James, a Black man born in Trinidad who used to write under the name J. R. Johnson. "Forest" was Raya Dunayevskaya, a woman born in today's Ukraine who used to write under the name Freddie Forest and who had worked as Leon Trotsky's Russian secretary during the late 1930s. Grace Chin Lee, a Chinese-American woman with a PhD in philosophy, was also one of the leading intellectuals of the Johnson-Forest tendency. Together they wrote several books and numerous articles and letters, which in total made up several thousand pages.¹

Characteristic of this tendency's political analyses was firstly a theory of state-capitalism that Dunayevskaya and James developed. Secondly, their arguments for recognizing the vitality of the anti-racist struggles and for analyzing it as having an independent validity of its own made them unique. Based on the latter, they rejected the prevalent class reductionism and instead conceived of the anti-racist struggle as central to their Marxist analysis, and anti-racism as crucial to any revolt against capitalism. One of the other notable features of this tendency was that they were quite original in their emphasis on Hegelian dialectics as a source of inspiration. These analyses and conceptual frameworks eventually put the Johnson-Forest tendency on a course which inevitably was going to clash with the mainstream Trotskyists, and toward the end of the 1940s they broke off from the Trotskyist movement.

At this time, there was only a handful other social thinkers in the US who found interest in studying Hegelian dialectics. One of them was Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse's counterposing of dialectical reason to fascism, and his critique of the philosophical positions of positivism and pragmatism in light of both Hegel and the young Marx, in his book *Reason and Revolution*,

¹ The American Trotskyist movement at this time created a number of important intellectuals, as detailed in Wald, A. M. (1987). *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s*. University of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill: London.

originally published in 1941, provided much inspiration the Johnson-Forest tendency. Later, Dunayevskaya reached out to Marcuse and started corresponding with him.² But even though the Johnson-Forest tendency shared many positions with Marcuse, they also found points of divergence. While they considered that Marcuse to some extent tended to have an elitist attitude toward working people, and evinced a form of academicized Eurocentrism, the Johnson-Forest tendency instead started to develop a concept of dialectics that opened up a framework toward the analyzing of social movements based on what later was to be called the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. For them, workers and other oppressed groups were always at the center of their analysis.

In the mid 1950s a tension in the Johnson-Forest tendency arose. James, Lee, and Dunayevskaya had each developed different attitude toward the role of revolutionary organizations, the role of a workers' newspaper, and the relation of workers and intellectuals. Dunayevskaya therefore broke from them and formed a new group consisting of workers, activists, and intellectuals, which went under the name News & Letters Committees. During the following years up until her death in 1987, Dunayevskaya wrote several books and published numerous articles under her own name and developed what came to be known as a major American branch of Marxist-Humanism. The "Humanism" in her brand of Marxist-Humanism had little to do with the traditions of liberal humanism, nor with the humanism associated with the Enlightenment, but was a dialectical revolutionary humanist legacy she found in Marx's early, as well as in his late, writings. She always considered that Marx's concern with the social being was related to his concern over freedom and the reconstitution of human wholeness and the development of a humane society.

Later, Dunayevskaya's incisive grasp of the humanist essence of Marx's work turned out to stand in sharp contrast to that of the anti-humanist thinkers that begun to appear in the early and late 1960s, and who still influence much of the academic left today, whether it be Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Edward Said, Paul Gilroy, Henry Louis Gates, or Giorgio Agamben, among others. Although from different perspectives, many of these anti-humanist thinkers rejected humanism because they considered it either as a fig-leaf justification for colonialism, a bourgeois denial of class politics, or especially as a belief in an abstract "man" that squats over the world and denies women, people of color, gays, lesbians, intersex, and disabled people, the agency and affirmation of their particularity. In opposition,

² After that moment Dunayevskaya, Marcuse, and Erich Fromm, kept corresponding for almost three and a half decades. See more in eds. Anderson, K. B. & Rockwell, R. (2012). *The Dunayevskaya-Marcuse-Fromm Correspondence, 1954-1978*. Lexington Books: Lanham, Maryland.

Dunayevskaya claimed that the dialectical and revolutionary humanism she found in Marx's writings, which was concrete and not abstract, was instead the very basis for her attacks on such abominations.

An important aspect of the branch of Marxism that the Johnson-Forest tendency prepared the ground for, and which Dunayevskaya later will develop further, that makes it stand out to much of contemporary academic discussion on the topic of the relationship between race and class, is its dialectical framework rooted in Hegel. As a social theory, dialectics begins with Hegel and Marx. For Hegel and Marx, ideas or social forms face negativity from within. If the process of facing negations deepens, then the old idea or social form will be overthrown at one point. However, the mere overthrowing of old ideas or forms will not create anything new but will remain a formless abstraction as long as the first negation does not develop some determinateness or specificity. Thus, in order for a new idea or social form to arise, a second negation, a negation of the negation, which is positive and concrete, is required to produce a new idea or form to replace the old. The Johnson-Forest tendency's dialectical notion guided them to start theorizing a positive, concrete alternative that could emerge from the current capitalist society, with its contradictory and antagonistic human relations. Thus, their works and activities that delineate contradictions in human relations is embedded with an idea of a dialectic that is constantly engaging in negations which are developing and directed at forming a concrete, determinate second negation that points toward a real alternative. Hence, we can observe that their discussions on alternatives for human relations in capitalist society do not end in abstract speculations but that they try to ground them in a philosophical logic rooted in concrete reality. Many of the contemporary theoreticians influenced by structural and post-structural traditions, as most of the anti-humanist thinker mentioned above, reject dialectics and therefore also reject the possibility of transcending the contradictions of capitalism and of creating a qualitatively new society, with new human relations.³

The Purpose of This Study

In academic discussions today so-called identity politics, whether around race, gender, or sexuality, treat these antagonisms as separate zones from that of class. Even in intersectional analyses, when it is acknowledged that multiple layers of different oppressive structures affect an individual's life chances, the different forms of oppression are often thought as separate

³ Dialectical and revolutionary humanism was also the basis for thinkers such as Frantz Fanon's attacks on racism and colonialism.

zones, or sometimes even as separate dimensions. These debates also extend to questions of solutions, whether recognition or redistribution? In general terms, the proponents of the politics of recognition claim that failure to prioritize calls for recognition falls short on addressing many of the realities faced by LGBTQIA-persons, of sexual, racial, and of national minorities, while on the other hand the defenders of class politics argue that the demands for recognition on the basis of group identity corresponds with a decline in claims for equitable redistribution of material resources.⁴ On the extreme end of the latter, there are class reductionists who claim that for example anti-racism is a distraction from the class struggle.⁵

In today's anti-racist activist circles though, the tone is different. Since the tragic killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin on 25 May 2020, which sparked the biggest spontaneous anti-racist demonstrations in many decades, and which are still going on when this is written, a creative mass movement of activists which is seriously rethinking the relationship between race and class has entered the scene. These protests quickly spread outside the US, and according to one estimation as many as 28 million people have so far participated in demonstrations in support of the #BlackLivesMatter-movement. London, Cape Town, and Malmö are just three examples of where big demonstrations outside the US have taken place during the summer of 2020. Many experts and journalists have emphasized that the character of these anti-racist uprisings have been different from previous ones. It has been singled out that the uprisings this time drew more people than before, both Black and white, and that the protestors showed signs of a deeper awareness to reject current society. Several journalists have claimed that these protests signified a turning point from earlier more reform-oriented protests, and also compared these uprisings with the uprisings of 1968. As one philosophy professor in Chicago expressed it:

White youth at rallies are holding up signs like 'White Silence is White Compliance' and interspersing themselves between the police and the crowd so that people of color have less chance of being the first to be beaten by their batons. It is as if years of discussion and debate on race theory and white privilege has been absorbed by a new generation. The impact of

⁴ The still ongoing discussions between Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser is one prime example of these discussions. Another one is in a book entitled *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* published by Verso, London in 2003, in which Fraser debates this issue with Axel Honneth.

It should be stressed that few people who call for recognition completely reject material redistribution. Rather they argue that this is a first step in reforms. In other words, they believe that these oppressive structures are a result of ideologies and attitudes, and that if you change these through "recognition" then greater equality of opportunity etc. will result.

⁵ See for example recent statements by evolutionary biologist Bret Weinstein.

this is likely to be felt far into the future, even as the movement experiences (as all do) ebbs and flows.⁶

Generally, in the #BlackLivesMatter-movement today, racism is seen as integrally tied to capitalism. This is a shift from earlier uprisings that focused more on police reforms and racism with little mention of anti-capitalist intentions. Therefore, the demands coming from this movement are going further and have a deeper rejection of current society. These demands are also a force which is an element in challenging the totality of current society. This master's thesis is written in the spirit of contributing to, and further advancing the discussions on the relationship between race, capitalism, and class. It is in light of the academic debate mentioned above and the current developments in the anti-racist movement that I will investigate in this thesis whether the writings of the Johnson-Forest tendency in the late 1940s and early 1950s can contribute to a transcendence of the analysis in which identity and class are treated as separate spheres.

There are a few specific reasons why I have chosen the work of the Johnson-Forest tendency. Firstly, at the outset it presents itself as an original Marxist analysis in which a politics of identity is central. It also appears original in the sense that the main sources of inspiration it draws from are rather unconventional in today's discussions on race and class. A second reason for the study ties into a larger project of critical importance, which concerns rediscovering and reevaluating formerly neglected voices of non-white and non-male persons from the past. This is a project that originally emerged out of feminist circles when feminist scholars realized that many contributions from women had been marginalized or even erased from the general curriculum in most academic disciplines. They therefore set out to start to look for women of the past whose voices had been forgotten for different reasons. Sometimes, absolutely brilliant and sharp analyses were discovered among the neglected and marginalized women. For now, we can at least conclude that the legacy of the Johnson-Forest tendency is anything but widespread. That is why an important part of the purpose of this study in the context of the above mentioned larger project will be to dig up the voice, and its reach, of the Johnson-Forest tendency.

In the American context, C. L. R. James is a somewhat well-known person in academic and activist circles. As an example of the latter, the Combahee River Collective, the famous group of Black lesbian feminists active in Boston between 1974-80, acknowledged James as one important source of inspiration. But outside the US or Caribbean context the members of the

⁶ Hudis, P. "The Seeds of Revolution have Sprouted: What is Now to be Done?" in *New Politics* 2020-08-06.

Johnson-Forest tendency, and their works as a whole, remain largely unknown. To my knowledge, no detailed studies of the Johnson-Forest tendency have yet been done that focus explicitly on these important formative years of the late 1940s, and no one has yet seriously studied and written about the source material of the Johnson-Forest tendency that I will discuss in Part 3 of this thesis.

For these reasons, this study will be dedicated to a serious investigation of how the analysis of the Johnson-Forest tendency is constructed, with a special focus on the relationship of race and class, and what makes their analysis stand out. Throughout the study, I will comment on and evaluate the strengths of their arguments, and also discuss what relevance their analysis might have for a social analysis of the relationship of race and class today.

General Outline

I will start this thesis with a section that further delineates the biographical and contextual background of the Johnson-Forest tendency. This is needed because this history remains largely unknown to the wider public today, and it provides the reader with important contextual background to the source material I will look at in the subsequent sections. For Part 2 of this thesis, I have selected a few important articles by the Johnson-Forest tendency on the relationship of race and class in the late 1940s when their social analyses started to be carved out. This section will, among other topics, include a critical article on the 1944 study *An American Dilemma*, directed by Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal. Although these articles are signed by a single author, either James or Dunayevskaya, the reader should be aware that these articles were discussed by all the members of the Johnson-Forest tendency before being published. Then, in Part 3, follows a section which investigates a correspondence among James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee which took place between 1949-51, primarily on the issue of dialectics. This discussion, I will argue, ties into the discussion on race, class, imperialism, the labor movement, and their subsequent turn toward sociological issues. Dunayevskaya, who wrote the most on these issues afterwards, later declared that this correspondence of 1949-51 had a crucial impact on her understanding of dialectics. For that reason, and because no one else has published anything that discusses the content of this correspondence at great length, I have chosen to examine it closely. Lastly, in the concluding section, I will sum up the main findings from my investigation and discuss the relevance of what I have found for an analysis of this topic today.

The works of the Johnson-Forest tendency cover a broad range of topics. I have chosen to limit my study to race and class, and dialectics in a sociological analysis, during this period between the mid-1940s to the early 1950s out of the complex and original notions the Johnson-Forest tendency produced.

Acknowledgement

I first came in contact with the writings of the Johnson-Forest tendency during a year of exchange studies at University of California Santa Barbara in 2015-16. Back then, professor of sociology, Kevin B. Anderson, introduced me to a few writings by Dunayevskaya, Lee, and James during a graduate seminar. Since then, we have spent many hours talking on office hours and via Skype, and also exchanged lots of emails on the subject. For being able to contextualize and comprehend the writings of the sometimes very difficult texts by the Johnson-Forest tendency, I therefore owe a special thanks to Kevin. My supervisor for this master's thesis, Carl-Göran Heidegren, professor of sociology at Lund University, is, no doubt, one of the most serious Hegel scholar alive right now. To have had one of the most serious Hegel-scholars alive in the same building as the one I have been working in, and also having him supervise me on this project, has been such a privilege. I am deeply thankful to Carl-Göran's helpful attitude and our many sessions discussing especially Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. The part on dialectics in this thesis could not have turned out the way it did without Carl-Göran. I also want to thank Grace Scrimgeour, Karel Ludenhoff, Lilia D. Monzó, Peter Hudis, and Heather A. Brown for value comments and feedback on earlier draft of this thesis. Finally, I also want to thank my partner Linete for love and support, and for endless of interesting discussions. You are my inspiration and therefore this thesis is dedicated to you.

Although that this thesis would not have been possible without input from those mentioned, I am myself responsible for the weaknesses and/or misunderstandings that might still be left in the text.

PART 1: Theoretical Background

Although there are a handful of books and biographies that have been written about the members of the Johnson-Forest tendency, see for example *Urbane Revolutionary: C. L. R. James and the Struggle for a New Society* by Frank Rosengarten⁷ and *In Love and Struggle* by Stephen M. Ward,⁸ there is still not much literature available on the Johnson-Forest tendency as a group. But there is one exception. Brian C. Lovato discusses the Johnson-Forest tendency's work in his book *Democracy, Dialectics, and Difference*.⁹ There, he argues that the Johnson-Forest tendency produced a distinct form of Marxism. But Lovato has a broad overview and looks at both the early period of the Johnson-Forest tendency and later developments and does therefore not go into a detailed discussion of the texts that I have chosen to take a closer look at in this thesis. Moreover, Kevin B. Anderson's *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*¹⁰ also has a section about the Johnson-Forest tendency. Although well researched, Anderson's section about the Johnson-Forest tendency is only ten pages long and also does not go into a more detailed discussion of their works. However, that the importance of the existence of the Johnson-Forest tendency as root of taking up the issues of race and class in a dialectical notion nowadays is getting more recognition is shown in the publication that will appear as *Raya Dunayevskaya's Intersectional Marxism* at Palgrave Macmillan.¹¹

The background to the formation of the Johnson-Forest tendency in the mid-1940s was what can be called a crisis in Marxism in the US. Two and a half decades since the Russian revolution of 1917, the hopes of a global socialist revolution that it had brought with it had begun to fade as more and more people realized the extreme authoritarian direction the Soviet Union had developed under Stalin's leadership. Leon Trotsky, however, now living in exile in

⁷ Rosengarten, F. (2010). *Urbane Revolutionary: C. L. R. James and the Struggle for a New Society*. University Press of Mississippi: Jackson.

⁸ Ward, S. M. (2016). *In Love and Struggle: The Revolutionary Lives of James and Grace Lee Boggs*. University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill.

⁹ Lovato, B. C. (2016). *Democracy, Dialectics, and Difference: Hegel, Marx, and 21st Century Social Movements*. Routledge: New York.

¹⁰ Anderson, K. B. (1995). *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study*. University of Illinois Press: Chicago.

¹¹ Eds. Anderson, K. B., Durkin, K. & Brown, H. A. (2020). *Raya Dunayevskaya's Intersectional Marxism: Race, Class, Gender, and the Dialectics of Liberation*. Palgrave Macmillan: London.

Mexico, and the followers of his movement still believed that the Soviet Union was a workers' state, although degenerate.¹²

The Intellectual Milieu of US Trotskyism and Race

Among those who gave up on their hopes for what the Russian revolution might bring, were many who formerly had called themselves Marxists but now abandoned Marx as a source of inspiration. Others left the dominant Marxist groups, which at this time were the Communist Party and different factions of the Trotskyist movement, and formed new groups which attempted to rethink Marxism from scratch.

Charles Denby, a Black auto worker at this time, later wrote a book in which he described the attitude of the Trotskyist party toward the Black movement during this period. In *Indignant Heart*, published in 1978, Denby writes that a white party member from the Trotskyist movement in which Denby was involved at that time, approached him in 1948 when he was trying to build an independent Black movement and said:

He [the white party member] told me, "Rollings [Rollings was a Black activist that dismissed the independent Black movement] is what all Negroes are going to have to come to in the final analysis. He looks at things not as a Negro but as a Marxist. The Negroes will have to forget they are Negroes and be Marxists."¹³

Thus, as Denby describes it, for the orthodox Trotskyists it was always the party first, last, and always.¹⁴

However, many prominent US intellectuals gravitated towards these small dissident Trotskyist groups and their journals during World War II and the immediate postwar period, before McCarthyism set in around 1949. Among these were, according to Anderson, political and social thinkers like Irving Howe, Meyer Shapiro, Mary McCarthy, and Dwight MacDonald, with others like McCarthy's close friend Hannah Arendt not part of these circles but indirectly connected to them. These circles also included well-known novelists like future Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow, the prominent Black writer Ralph Ellison, and Norman Mailer. What united these writers was intense opposition to fascism, but in a manner that also

¹² Leon Trotsky was born in 1879 and murdered in 1940. He was a leader of the Bolshevik party during the October revolution on 1917 and later became the leader of the Red Army. After the rise of Stalin, Trotsky was removed from his leading positions, and eventually expelled from the Soviet Union in 1929. In August 1940 he was executed with an ice axe by Russian agent Ramón Mercader in Mexico City.

¹³ Denby, C. (1978). *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal*. South End Press: Boston. Denby's book is an autobiographical book which was a pioneering work in this genre.

¹⁴ In the 1950s Denby became member of News & Letters Committees and was the editor of their journal for several years.

included deep hostility to Stalinism, tracing itself back to what they often saw as Stalin's betrayal of the Spanish Republic and most significantly, the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 that paved the way for the outbreak of World War II with Hitler's invasion of Poland. These intellectuals clashed with those leftwing intellectuals who remained less critical of the Soviet Union, among them Lillian Hellman, W. E. B. Du Bois, Howard Fast, Oliver C. Cox, and Ernest Hemingway.

The Johnson-Forest tendency was such a dissident group that attempted to rethink Marxism. It originally was formed inside the Workers Party of the Trotskyist movement when some like-minded members started to question and challenge its leadership. Against defenders of the Party line, the Johnson-Forest tendency disagreed with the Workers Party's leadership because they considered them unable to address the racism that existed both in the movement and in society, and furthermore that the leadership actually was incapable of recognizing the crucial role of the Black workers' struggle. They also tended to reject the traditional Leninist vanguardist form of organization that the Trotskyist movement relied upon. The theoretical development of this tendency was primarily headed by James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee.

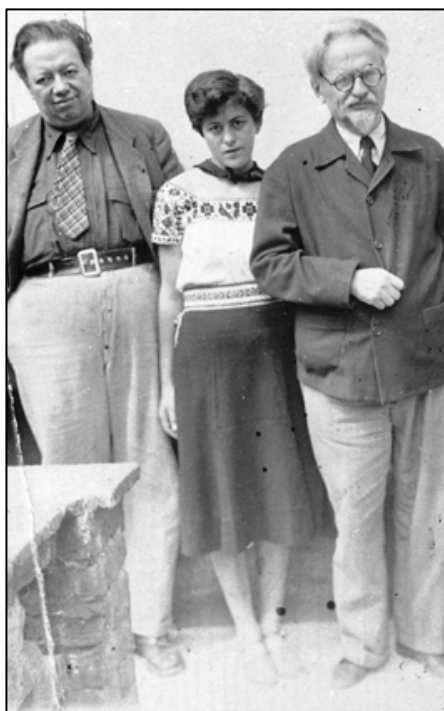
James was a Black writer, historian, journalist, and philosopher born in Trinidad in the Caribbean in 1901 who had lived in London and in Paris. He used to publish his most radical writings on politics, literature, and culture under the pen name J. R. Johnson. Shakespeare and Hermann Melville were among his favorite authors. His most important early book was a serious study of the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804, which was the first successful insurrection by self-liberated slaves against European colonial rule. The title of that book is *The Black Jacobins*,¹⁵ and it is now considered a classic.



C. L. R. James

Dunayevskaya, descendant from a Jewish milieu, was born in 1910 in today's Ukraine and had during the late 1930s worked as Trotsky's secretary in Mexico. But she broke from him in August 1939 after Stalin had signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact with Hitler and Trotsky did hold on to the Soviet Union as a worker's state, although as a degenerate one. Like many other intellectuals at that time, Dunayevskaya just could not accept that a workers' state, whatsoever that would mean, would sign such a pact with a fascist state. Dunayevskaya often wrote under the name Freddie Forest. In the early 1940s she

¹⁵ James, C. L. R. (1938). *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. Secker & Warburg Ltd: London.



From left to right; *Diego Rivera, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Leon Trotsky, in Mexico, 1939*

had access to Russian language documents with statistical information on production inside the Soviet Union and with these sources she started to develop a theory of the Soviet Union as a state-capitalist system.

Lee was the youngest of them. She was a Chinese American born in 1915, and the only one of them who had formal academic training in philosophy. Lee had earned a PhD in philosophy from Bryn Mawr College, near Philadelphia. She later married the Black autoworker and writer James Boggs and took his surname. Lee was a dedicated revolutionary and learnt German to be able to read Marx in the original and to translate his works. She

played an important role in working out the positions of

the Johnson-Forest tendency. However, the majority of the source material I have chosen to look at in Part 2 and 3 of this thesis, are writings that are signed by either James or Dunayevskaya. Lee lived in Detroit and lived the longest of them. She continued to be a local community and anti-racist activist for her whole life. When she passed in 2015 at the age of 100, President Barack Obama, who knew Lee, sent his condolences.



Grace Chin Lee

By writing on and by making especially important theoretical conceptualizations of the crucial place of Black revolt in the US radical movement, the Johnson-Forest tendency criticized the Trotskyist movement's racial policies. But this was not all of what they did. Anderson writes that during the 1940s this productive and creative group also developed a concept of Stalin's Russia as a totalitarian state-capitalist society, which was an especially original contribution. Furthermore, they also critiqued the emergent labor bureaucracy and wrote on rank-and-file workers revolts as examples of worker creativity. They also were among the first in the US to read, translate, and discuss Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx's debt to Hegel, and Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*.¹⁶ Besides, Dunayevskaya wrote several

¹⁶ Anderson, K. B. (1995). p. 199.

articles under her own name in the major academic journal *American Economic Review*, focusing on Stalinist distortions of Marxism.

The Theory of State-Capitalism

The theory of the Soviet Union as a state-capitalist system became a spearhead in the theoretical notions of the Johnson-Forest tendency. Alessandra Spano, an Italian philosopher, writes in a forthcoming anthology on Dunayevskaya that Dunayevskaya, who had intensely and critically studied Stalin's five-years-plans and the Soviet Union's economic development, argued together with James and Lee that in order to fundamentally understand the reality of the Stalinist society one has to seriously study the material relations in society and especially the social relations of production. This focus on relations of production contradicted Trotsky and his followers that kept dwelling on the form of property relations, whether nationalized or privatized, as the decisive difference between capitalism and socialism.¹⁷

Peter Hudis, an American philosopher, has argued that when Dunayevskaya and James worked out the theory of the Soviet Union as a state-capitalist society, they studied the economy of Stalin's Russia through the lens of Marx's three volumes of *Capital*. From that, Hudis indicates, they concluded that the law of value and surplus value, as delineated in *Capital*, was still prevalent in the Soviet economy. Thus, the law of value that Marx lays out, that the value of a commodity is not determined by the actual amount of labor time needed to produce a commodity, but instead by the time that is socially necessary to produce it on the world market, still prevailed in the Soviet Union. Through this reasoning, Dunayevskaya could provide an economic explanation to why there erupted so many unplanned recurring economic crises in the planned economy of the Soviet Union. She held that while it appeared that the Soviet state controlled production in Stalin's Russia, that was in fact not the case. Instead, socially necessary labor time, which Marx described as a dictatorship that operates behind the backs of the producers, dictated the value of the commodities produced, also in the Soviet Union. Thus, not even a dictatorial state, as the totalitarian Soviet Union was, could escape the constant imbalances, disequilibrium, and financial collapses associated with value production.¹⁸ That is why the arguments that the Johnson-Forest tendency laid out about the

¹⁷ Spano, A. "Unchaining the Dialectic, On the Threshold of Revolution: Dunayevskaya's Discovery of Hegel in the Birth of Marxist-Humanism" in eds. Anderson, K. B., Durkin, K., & Brown, H. A. (2020). *Raya Dunayevskaya's Intersectional Marxism: Race, Class, Gender, and the Dialectics of Liberation*. Palgrave Macmillan: London.

¹⁸ Hudis, P. "The Indispensability of Philosophy in the Struggle to Develop an Alternative to Capitalism" in eds. Anderson, K. B., Durkin, K., & Brown, H. A. (2020). *Raya Dunayevskaya's Intersectional Marxism: Race, Class, Gender, and the Dialectics of Liberation*. Palgrave Macmillan: London.

Soviet Union being not a socialist society but instead a state-capitalist society, caused considerable friction with the orthodox Trotskyists who instead held that the Soviet Union, although degenerate, still was a workers' state that deserves critical support. Likewise, it also caused friction with those Left-wing groups that identified a third way between socialism and capitalism, i.e. a form of state socialism or bureaucratic collectivism, as a viable alternative to capitalism.

In addition, the members of the Johnson-Forest tendency, who turned the focus of their study of the Soviet economy to the relations of production and the material conditions of the workers, asked how it could be that there were still strikes, labor camps, hierarchies and differentiation in the working class, and strong factory discipline in the so-called worker's state? On those accounts, the Soviet Union did not signify a development from capitalism to socialism from the perspective of the Johnson-Forest tendency, but rather a development toward an extreme form of capitalism, so called state-capitalism. They conceived of it as that the whole Russian state acted as one giant capitalist, and of state-capitalism as a new stage of development of capitalism on the world level. Hudis writes, in the above mentioned article, that they also compared and saw similar tendencies of state intervention in the economy in Hitler's four-year-plans, and even in Roosevelt's New Deal.¹⁹

State-Capitalism and its Relation to Racism

While discussing state-capitalism as a new stage of development of capitalism, they also made striking comparisons between the most oppressed workers in the Soviet Union and the most oppressed workers in the US, by which they perceived to be the Black workers. This then led the Johnson-Forest tendency to connect their economic study of state-capitalism in Russia to racism in the US. In her essay on Dunayevskaya, Spano quotes Dunayevskaya from 1948 when she wrote that Black workers experience an oppression that extends far beyond the factory walls. At that time, Dunayevskaya wrote about racial segregation and the Jim Crow legislation that:

...it [the racist legislation] will give his [the Black worker] developing class consciousness a hostility to the existing society and a keener determination to destroy it. The proletarian vanguard must respond by recognizing not only the validity but the inevitability of Negro mass movement against the double oppression and strive to lead this movement and harness its revolutionary potentialities for the struggle against capitalist society. But only that

¹⁹ Ibid.

revolutionary party can do this which understands the objectively revolutionary role that these independent mass movements can play in the reconstruction of society on communist beginnings.²⁰

Here, still operating within the framework of a Leninist party, Dunayevskaya and the other members in the Johnson-Forest tendency essentially elaborated a conception of intersectionality between class and race, in which the idea of race played a crucial role as to awareness of societal oppression.

But their conceptualization did not end with an understanding of how race is produced by multiple forms of oppression. Instead, they argued that because of the experience of being oppressed in multiple ways, the Black worker can potentially develop a deeper hostility toward existing society, and perhaps a deeper revolutionary passion. However, they never argued that the Black worker necessarily will be revolutionary in every moment. The argument was instead that because of the objective situation in the history of capitalism in the US, with four hundred years of slavery and racial oppression, Black people suffer from more layers of oppressive structures which have materialized in society. This simply means that when the people who are most oppressed start to demand that they be treated as human beings, and not as dehumanized things, then that will challenge the society on an even more fundamental basis than if a more privileged group calls for recognition, i.e. one who already benefits from certain privileges.²¹

Moreover, Spano sums up that the Johnson-Forest tendency, for the reasons stated above, harshly criticized the Trotskyist movement for:

...its incapacity to grasp the specificity of the Black dimension, which rather than being homogenized in the name of an abstract unity of the working class, needed to be recognized as a protagonist in the American radical movement and in the revolutionary process.²²

Frustrated and upset with the conclusions that the Trotskyists ended up with, the Johnson-Forest tendency started to search outside the established sources in the Trotskyist movement for new theoretical inspiration that could philosophically ground an analysis that included all oppressed groups' struggle for liberation. Soon they found an emerging interest in Lenin's so-called *Philosophical Notebooks*. These were notes Lenin had written down during his study of Hegel while he was exiled in Switzerland during the WWI. Lenin had undertaken a study of

²⁰ Forest, F. [pseudonym for Raya Dunayevskaya] "The Industrialization of the Negro" in *Fourth International*. Vol. 9 1948, No. 2, p. 26.

²¹ Part 2 of this thesis will examine this argument closer.

²² Spano, A. (2020).

Hegel after being outraged by the German Social Democratic party when they voted in favor of the war credits of WWI on 4 August 1914. What happened in the 1940s was that the Johnson-Forest tendency discovered a parallel between Lenin's need to reconstruct Marxist theory at a time of great flux and crisis, and theirs, in a period of fascism, Stalinism, and the WWII. They noted that Lenin's response to this was to go back into the library to study Hegel. When the Johnson-Forest tendency started to seriously read Lenin's notes, they soon realized that there might be something in there that could be of further interest for them.

In 1949 these notes by Lenin did not yet exist in English translation. Dunayevskaya, who knew Russian, therefore started to translate them and sent them over to James and Lee to read. Over the following years an extensive correspondence unfolded among them concerning Lenin's notes. Dunayevskaya was thrilled. James and Lee were too, but they interpreted Lenin's notes in a slightly different way.

Before taking a closer look at this correspondence, which will be the topic for Part 3 of this thesis, and some of their writings on race and class which will be the topic for Part 2, I will first say a little bit more about the intellectual climate at this time, and sort out how it was in the first place that they found these notes by Lenin and their subsequent interest in Hegel.

Searching for a New Practice and a New Theory

The Johnson-Forest tendency's appreciation of Hegel in the late 1940s was original but not unique. Herbert Marcuse had in his book *Reason and Revolution* insisted that Lenin's dialectical method expressed a hallmark of revolutionary Marxism.²³ *Reason and Revolution* was published in 1941. Marcuse was then living in New York. Anderson writes that Marcuse drew a sharp dividing line between Lenin's Marxism and the mechanistic materialism of Trotsky and Bukharin,²⁴ and that:

...Marcuse also contrasts Lenin's preoccupation with dialectical methodology to the reformist socialist Eduard Bernstein's rejection of the "snare" of the dialectic in favor of what Marcuse terms "the revival of common sense as the organon of knowledge" and to Karl

²³ Marcuse, H. (1941). *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD: London, p. 401.

²⁴ Nikolaj Bukharin, born in 1888 and executed in 1938, was an economist and leader of the Bolshevik party. During the 1920s he was an advocate for the New Economic Policy-policies in the Soviet Union.

Kautsky's "revisionist" Marxism, which, writes Marcuse, was "tested by the standards of positivist sociology and transformed into natural science."²⁵

Reason and Revolution was the first Hegelian Marxist book ever published in the English language. There were a handful of Marxists around who had found an interest in Hegelian dialectics at that time in the US, and as in Europe, for example, György Lukács, Henri Lefebvre, and Ernst Bloch. However, there were no English translations of their works. The members of the Johnson-Forest tendency all read and appreciated Marcuse's book in the mid-1940s. But, as mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis, the Johnson-Forest tendency and Marcuse did not agree on everything. At first, according to the members of the Johnson-Forest tendency, they tended to the Frankfurt school's critical writings on, for example, modern popular culture, and on personalities easily manipulated by authoritarian leaders, towards an elitist attitude toward working people. Secondly, the Johnson-Forest tendency observed the fact that the members of the Frankfurt school and thus also Marcuse hardly devoted any attention to anti-colonial movements in the global South, nor toward the Civil Rights movement in the US. The members of the Johnson-Forest tendency instead conceived of the anti-colonial and the anti-racist movements that were going on at this time as of crucial importance.

Later on Dunayevskaya and Marcuse had closer contact and Marcuse even wrote the preface to the first monograph that Dunayevskaya published, which was entitled *Marxism and Freedom*, and that appeared in 1958. In 1979, when Marcuse passed away Dunayevskaya wrote, in a memorial article dedicated to Marcuse, about her first meeting with *Reason and Revolution*. She wrote:

In that seminal work [*Reason and Revolution*], Marcuse established the Humanism of Marxism, and re-established the revolutionary dialectic of Hegel-Marx, for the first time for the American public. It is impossible to forget the indebtedness we felt for Marcuse when that breath of fresh air and vision of a truly classless society was published.²⁶

Nevertheless, Anderson also notes that at the time of the publication of Marcuse's book, there were many who expressed severe criticism of it too. Sidney Hook, a very prominent left-wing philosopher in the 1940s, and part of the group sometimes referred to as the "New York Intellectuals," wrote in a review of Marcuse's book that the chapter in which Marcuse

²⁵ Anderson, K. B. (1995). p. 198. Eduard Bernstein was a member of the German Social Democratic Party and an advocate for reformism, Karl Kautsky was also a member of the German Social Democratic Party and one of the strong advocates for the approving of war credits to WWI.

²⁶ Dunayevskaya, R. "Herbert Marcuse, Marxist Philosopher" in *Newsletter of the International Society for the Sociology of Knowledge*. Vol. 5 1979, No. 2, p. 11.

criticizes the positivist sociology of August Comte is a bad chapter. Hook, who defended Comte's positivism, argued instead that positivism seeks to discover what the facts are by scientific, not dialectical, methods. And the leading sociologist Daniel Bell, another member of the New York Intellectuals, held similar views towards Marcuse's book. Bell also wrote disparagingly of the Johnson-Forest tendency, mixed up with personal and derogatory attacks on James and Dunayevskaya.²⁷

Anderson concludes that in retrospect, these personal attacks give some indication of how unusual the Johnson-Forest tendency must have appeared. The theorists of the group consisted of one Black man and two women with immigrant backgrounds, one Russian and the other Chinese, who were interested in Hegelian Marxism, in the postwar period in the US! One should recall that this was at the time of McCarthyism in the US, when socialists and communists could be accused of subversion or treason without proper regard for evidence. Moreover, the fact that the social theory they produced, in the heydays of the heartland of industrial capitalism when Fordism flourished centered so much on race and its connection to class made them even more unusual. This was because at the time in the US, few prominent social theorists influenced by Marxism, except W. E. B. Du Bois²⁸ and Oliver C. Cox and a few others, focused on race.

Now, let's turn to their writings on race and class.

²⁷ Anderson, K. B. (1995). pp. 199-200.

²⁸ Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* from 1903 is, I argue, indebted to Hegelian dialectics. Some decades later, Frantz Fanon was also going to let dialectics inspire his writings on racism, colonialism, and resistance. Thus, although not always acknowledged in contemporary discussions, dialectics has influenced several of the major and pioneering treatments of race and colonialism in social theory.

PART 2: Race and Class in a New Framework

James's 1938 book *Black Jacobins* signified a breakthrough on the literature on the legacy of the French revolution and slave uprisings, in several aspects. The book examines the brutal conditions of slavery, the dynamics of the Caribbean economy, and the European feudal system leading up to the French and the subsequent Haitian Revolution of 1789 and 1791 respectively. The protagonist in James's book is Toussaint L'Ouverture, a man born a slave in Haiti, who becomes inspired by the uprisings in France and leads the, according to James, first and only successful slave uprising. In a foreword to a later reprint of the book James wrote about the approach he had when starting to work on the book in the late 1930s. He said:

I made up my mind that I would write a book in which Africans or people of African descent instead of constantly being the object of other peoples' exploitation and ferocity would themselves be taking action on a grand scale and shaping other people to their own needs.²⁹

This is evidence of his humanist perspective as he was wanting to demonstrate the agency among African peoples. Dunayevskaya read and appreciated James's book because it aligned to her own humanism. However, at the time of its publication Dunayevskaya and James were not acquainted with each other. They met in Trotsky's home in Mexico in 1939, but it is not until the early 1940s, after Dunayevskaya moved back to the US, that they start working together.

In *Marxism and the Negro Problem* written by Dunayevskaya on 18 June 1944, which was aimed toward other fellow activists in the American Trotskyist movement, she makes her analysis of the connection between racism and capitalism explicit. She states in the beginning of the article that the problem of racism is a problem that Marxism has to deal with in a Marxist manner, and adds that this is what she will set out to do. She first explains that much of the inspiration for her analysis of how to view the relationship between race and class is to be found in Lenin's works, arguing that Lenin opened up the way for her analysis when he discussed imperialism and the national question. Briefly summarized, Dunayevskaya's argument is this: Lenin was the first post-Marx Marxist that delved into a serious study of Hegel. From his study of Hegel, he concluded that there is not a one-way causal relationship

²⁹ James, C. L. R. (1980). *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. Vintage Books: New York, p. V.

between appearance and essence. Instead, he found an argument in Hegel's writings arguing that appearance must also have an objective status. This meant that there is a dialectical, and not a causal, relationship between the two.³⁰ Moreover, Lenin concluded that the appearance of capitalism had changed since Marx's days. Now, in the early 1900s, capitalism appeared as a global imperial system, and that if the appearance of capitalism had shifted, then something in its essence must have shifted too. Lenin then theorized that the new essence of capitalism must be monopoly. From that he concluded that it is therefore not only the industrial workers in the West that make up the opposition to the capitalist system, but also the oppressed and marginalized peoples within the colonized world.

In his argumentation Lenin emphasized the role of the oppressed and marginalized elements of the colonized world. He thought that their struggle for national independence would weaken imperialism and therefore improve the possibilities for a proletarian revolution to succeed. To explain why, he pointed out that the enormous profits generated from imperialism created a possibility for a small, relatively high waged section in the industrial working class in the West to emerge. He referred to this section of the working class as the "aristocracy of labor." Because of this group's objective economic position, Lenin argued, it would not have the same potential to develop the same revolutionary consciousness as that the lower strata potentially could do. The lower strata have a potential to develop an even more revolutionary consciousness because its existence in capitalism is negated in more senses than the aristocracy of labor's existence. Therefore, Lenin wrote, revolutionaries need to go "lower and deeper" into the sections of the working class which are in the position to see and to oppose this development of an aristocracy of labor from within. The point he made was that this section of the working class, the aristocracy of labor, will in some respects benefit from the system and therefore have a view of the system which is distorted due to its privileges.

Concerning imperialism and the colonies, Lenin wrote that:

...the dialectic of history is such that small nations, powerless as an independent factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as the ferment, one of the bacilli which help the real power against imperialism to come to the scene, namely the socialist proletariat.³¹

The reason he thought that the socialist proletariat was the real power against imperialism was because at that time the core of capitalist production, the capitalist motor, was located in the industries in the West which had a large socialist labor movement, whom it would be

³⁰ This will be further developed in Part 3 of this thesis.

³¹ Quote by Lenin brought up in Forest, F. (1944). *Marxism and the Negro Problem: A Discussion Article*, p. 263.

impossible to create socialism without. He realized that if capitalism as a system were to be overthrown, then it was of crucial importance that the colonized subjects rise up, but without an uprising of the labor movements in the capitalist core, the colonized subjects could not succeed.

The way this relates to racism in the US is that Dunayevskaya connected the colonized subjects that Lenin talked about with the Blacks in the US, both in terms of an oppressed nation, but also in terms of being the deeper and lower strata of the working class. Lenin, who at one point actually mentioned the Blacks in the US as a colonized nation, did not literally believe that they made up a nation (and neither did Dunayevskaya), but he saw aspects of their struggle as similar to the colonized masses' struggle for national emancipation. In the same way he wrote in passing, in the foreword to the *Preliminary Thesis of the National Question*, about the Polish Jews as an example of a problem to be dealt with under the National Question.³² What emerged out of this in Lenin's thinking was a two fold model for revolution, one aspect of which was that the colonized subjects had a crucial role of inspiring and waking up the labor movements in the capitalist core. This came out of his concrete analysis of the growing inequalities within the European working class, and it was that way of reasoning, of grounding his analysis in the dialectics of the concrete, which was what Dunayevskaya found inspiring in Lenin's thought.

To clarify, Dunayevskaya's position on the relation between the Marxist movement and the anti-racist movement was not one limited to a relation of support, and that merely a statement of support by the Marxists to the anti-racists was insufficient. Her position was that a Marxist movement needs to support and develop the anti-racist movement in which Black working class and middle class and progressive white workers are involved, not for abstract reasons, but because these struggles must inevitably develop along lines of independent mass activity, and because this would lessen division inside the working class, and undermining its false consciousness on race on the part of white workers. She found and quoted original passages in both Marx and Lenin where they discussed how the different positionalities of the working classes in the oppressed and the oppressor countries take part in creating national antipathies against the workers in the oppressed countries. In *Marxism and the Negro Problem*, she quotes Marx when he says that:

The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so

³² Forest, F. (1944). *Marxism and the Negro Problem: A Discussion Article*, p. 260.

turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude is much the same as that of the “poor whites” to the “[n-word]” in the former slave states of the U.S.A. ... It (the antagonism) is the secret of the impotence of the English working class despite their organization.³³

She also brought up a passage from Lenin in which he concretized exactly that what Marx said in the quote. Lenin argued that when the proletariat of an oppressed country occupies a subordinate position to the proletariat of the oppressing country, then this objective economic and social difference between the workers in the colonized and the imperialist countries creates the ground for the development of racist ideas in every aspect. Economically, the workers of the oppressor nation more easily become part of the labor aristocracy; politically, they participate more fully in the life of the country; and intellectually, they feel superior because they are taught disdain for the laborer of the oppressed nation.

Against Class-Reductionism

Dunayevskaya writes, in the same article, that some of the American Marxists are obsessed with the idea that if the Black people’s struggle was classified as part of the National Question, then that would lead Black workers to disorientation and the loss of sight in the class struggle. What they fear, she writes, is that the Black bourgeoisie would marginalize the Marxist movement inside the Black community with liberal propaganda, and minimize the revolutionary aspect of the Black movement. To this Dunayevskaya answers:

There is a danger also that the Negro movement would be dominated by its petty bourgeois leaders. There is always that kind of danger. But what is the way in which, from the beginning of Marxism to the present day, Marxists have always met this problem? By constantly preaching about the class struggle? Yes, certainly. Marxists always have and always will preach about the class struggle until the complete overthrow of capitalist society. But the whole point of placing the Negro question in the category of the National Question is the following: In order to prevent the domination of the movement against national oppression by the petty bourgeoisie, the Marxists place themselves at the head of this movement. They do so neither with equivocation nor with the air of ‘how unfortunate it is that we have to waste time on this unfortunate weakness of the masses.’ No. The only way to

³³ Ibid. Marx here used a racist expression to express an anti-racist position. A more detailed discussion on this can be found in Anderson, K. B. (2016). *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

defeat the petty bourgeois is boldly to proclaim not only the legitimacy but the revolutionary significance of the struggle against national oppression and on our own way to drive the petty bourgeoisie from the leadership. Nowhere is this better expressed than in an article written by Lenin in which he explains how Marx used this method in connection with the agrarian question in the United States. Lenin then applies the same method in Russia.³⁴

Furthermore, she adds that even if the Black people's movement develops in a reactionary way, and even if the revolutionaries are unable to influence the movement, then that only proves that the Marxists need to go even further in their attempt of understanding the underlying, deep economic and social motives giving rise to the development. Completely the wrong way, she writes, is to dismiss the movement as non-revolutionary and to throw epithets at it. On the contrary, she stresses that always retaining to a concrete analysis of the real class differences, even within the working class, and having solidarity with those most oppressed, is precisely what she thinks Lenin meant when he opened up the interpretation of the issues of racism as a National question.³⁵

Class reductionism is the claim that the nature of racism is completely explained or exhausted in its economic origins. It denies that racism take on a life of its own and extends beyond economics. This is not the position of the Johnson-Forest tendency. Instead, what they hold is that the nature of a phenomenon is not exhausted by its origin, but that it neither can be fully understood without specifying its origin.

The Economic Foundation for the Continuation of Racism

Before going into Dunayevskaya's discussion on the economic roots of racism, it needs to be pointed out that she did not reduce it to a base and a superstructure model, which is sometimes associated with crude, non-dialectical, versions of Marxism. The idea usually attributed to Marxists is that they emphasize an economic base which is thought to be the essence of society which causes the superstructure. The thought is that there is a causal relationship running from the base to the superstructure. But that is not the case in Dunayevskaya's brand of Marxism. For her, the relationship between objective economic relations and cultural ideas is a relation in which each affects the other as both cause and effect. In other words, it is a dialectical relationship. Part 3 of this thesis will develop this topic.

³⁴ Forest, F. (1944). *Marxism and the Negro Problem: A Discussion Article*, p. 262. Here, Dunayevskaya is still operating within the framework of a Leninist party, but this is something she later will distance herself from.

³⁵ Forest, F. (1944). *Marxism and the Negro Problem: A Discussion Article*, p. 263.

Dunayevskaya notes that there are a handful of historians and liberal social theorists in her time who are discussing the issue of racism in the US. However, she finds most of them unable to give a comprehensive answer to why race prejudices continued to exist even after slavery was abolished during the Civil War. Some of the historians and liberal social theorists explain that racism persists because of a “stigma,” or because Americans are hypocrites. What they fail to recognize, she argues, is that the economic inequalities between whites and Blacks persisted after slavery. Those forty acres and a mule, which Blacks were promised after the Civil War, were never given to them. Instead, what replaced slavery was the sharecropper or crop-lien system, where the poor Black workers who owned nothing but their labor power had to borrow money to be able to purchase food, clothes, and medicine for the coming year from white land owners, based on a form of speculation on yields from their. The speculation system on the coming harvest almost always ended up so that at the end of the year the Black workers found themselves in great debt to the white land owners, and thus had to work another year just in order to pay off debts.³⁶ The crop-lien system thus created a dependency system. Blacks came into a personal relation of dependence with their white bosses, and in such a context it was inevitable that the racist prejudices from the time of slavery was not going to disappear. Dunayevskaya writes:

Historians who state that the Negro problem is rooted in slavery and stop there fail to see the crux of the question. The “stigma” of slavery could not have persisted so long if the economic remains of slavery had not persisted. The Civil War abolished the institution of slavery, but did not give the land to him who tilled it. Not having got the land, the peasant’s fate was inevitable, whether he be white or Negro. Even in Russia, where there was some fraudulent attempt to give the serf the land, it was impossible for the Russian serf to rise above the needs of the backward economy. All the more so in the South where the Negro did not get his “40 acres and a mule”. Cotton remaining dominant, semifeudal relationships were inevitable. The division of labor set up by the cotton economy may not be disturbed. The social relations arising on the basis of the cotton economy remain “less changed than the soil itself on which the cotton is grown”. Within the economic remains of slavery lie the economic roots of the Negro Question.³⁷

³⁶ In several aspects the crop-lien system in the South can be compared to the “statar-systemet” in a Swedish context. In the statar-system officially free peasant workers worked at farms and were paid ‘natura’ (stat) from the master. Practically though, statarna were often in debt for their whole life and, too, lived in a form of dependency relation to their masters.

³⁷ Forest, F. (1944). *Marxism and the Negro Problem: A Discussion Article*, p. 264.

What she points out later on in the article is that when the industrialization swept over the South and changed the economy, it is a distortion to say that the industrial economy was built on the ruins of slavery. Instead, she points out that the economic legacy of slavery never really disappeared and that the industrialization of the South took place alongside it.

Criticism of Gunnar Myrdal's Study of Race in the US

The most ambitious sociological study of racism in the US during the 1940s was the widely influential study made by a team of almost 75 researchers, many of them Black, under the direction of the Swedish economist, and future Nobel Laureate, Gunnar Myrdal.³⁸ It was a massive study that received \$250.000 in funding from the Carnegie Foundation, which in today's value equals around \$3.700.000, and took 4 years to complete, resulting in a book of two volumes consisting of almost 1.500 pages in total. The book was entitled *An American Dilemma*³⁹ and was published in 1944. Dunayevskaya saw many valuable sections in the book, but also expressed severe criticism of it.

Heidegren has studied the theoretical underpinnings of Myrdal's work and compared it to later significant works in philosophy and social theory, such as Axel Honneth's *Das Recht der Freiheit*. Heidegren summarizes the line of argument in Myrdal's book in this way:

An American Dilemma is about *the* American dilemma. This dilemma is essentially a moral dilemma, consisting in a moral tension or conflict. Furthermore, it is a white man's dilemma or problem. It is situated in the very heart of every white American. The dilemma is about the discrepancy between the most general values adhered to and lower-level valuations. It is about the discrepancy between the ideals of Americans, summarized in what is called the American Creed, and their actual behavior. This dilemma relates to various forms of social misdevelopment in America. It is about a complex of problems that can find a solution, or at least a significant improvement, by way of rational planning and social engineering.⁴⁰

In a review that Dunayevskaya wrote of Myrdal's study, published in the journal *The New Internationalist* in November 1944, Dunayevskaya starts by praising his attempt at including all aspects of the outcome of racism. Thus, she thinks that it is a great achievement that Myrdal includes and discusses how everything from racial segregation and discrimination on the

³⁸ In 1974 Myrdal was rewarded the Nobel prize in economics together with Friedrich von Hayek.

³⁹ Myrdal, G. (1944). *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Harper & Brothers: New York.

⁴⁰ Heidegren, C.-G. "Ultimate Values and Immanent Critique: On Axel Honneth's *Das Recht der Freiheit* and Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*" p. 223, in eds. Lysaker O., Jakobsen, J. (2015). *Recognition and Freedom: Axel Honneth's Political Thought*, Brill: Leiden.

housing market, the job market, in terms of access to health care, education, legal support, to how racism and segregation in more or less every sector of modern life in the US affects Black people. However, she locates some shortcomings of the study. The first is in Myrdal's discussion of historical explanations of the race problem. In analyzing this, Dunayevskaya discovers a philosophical problem in Myrdal's attempt which affects her view on the work as a whole.

She criticizes Myrdal for claiming that no great historical works had been written on race relations in the period usually referred to as the Reconstruction period, the decade after the Civil War. Dunayevskaya considers W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America*,⁴¹ originally published in 1935, to be a great work about this period and wonders if Myrdal's silence about it is a sign of either only a serious miss or a sign of a deeper philosophical problem. She thinks that this period was a very important time in terms of race relations, because during and after the Reconstruction period there was a movement of poor white and Black peasants that organized together against the dominant white Southerners. The National Colored Farmer's Alliance, a movement of the 1890s, which organized Black sharecroppers and at its peak had one and one-quarter million members, organized, although separately, together with three million white farmers in the Southern Alliance, and together the National Colored Farmer's Alliance and the Southern Alliance fought their class battle against the white plantocracy as one. This was an exception, but it is exactly because it was an exception that it is so important to remember and to study, according to Dunayevskaya. That is because it shows that the overcoming of racial antagonism is possible through a dialectical analysis that foregrounds social oppositions, even among white Southerners.

Thus, Dunayevskaya points to the fact that there were occasions of interracial solidarity which Myrdal dismisses. She states that Myrdal rejects these occasions not because of lack of time and money to investigate this period in history, but because of his approach. Myrdal writes that:

Our hypothesis is that a society where there are broad social classes and, in addition, more minute distinctions and splits in the lower strata, the lower class groups will to a great extent take care of keeping each other subdued, thus relieving, to that extent, the higher classes of this otherwise painful task necessary to the monopolization of the power and advantages.⁴²

⁴¹ Du Bois, W. E. B. (2014). *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruction Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

⁴² Forest, F. (1944). *Negro Intellectuals in Dilemma: Myrdal's Study of a Crucial Problem*, p. 272 (this is a direct quote from p. 68 in Myrdal's study).

Dunayevskaya concludes that this means that Myrdal thinks in an ahistorical manner that the white and the Black masses, rather than turning against their common oppressor, will always fight each other. Furthermore, she finds that Myrdal writes that he rejects “the Marxian scheme” because it:

...assumes that there is an actual solidarity between the several lower class groups against the higher classes, or, in any case, a potential solidarity which as a matter of natural development is bound to emerge.⁴³

Myrdal therefore argues that this “Marxian scheme” has influenced Black intellectuals and distorted their view. He thinks that a Black and white labor movement could never have been formed in the South because of the racial differences, here ignoring the above mentioned populists of the 1890s for example. Hence, his point was that racial differences were the main reason to why a labor movement in the South failed. Dunayevskaya’s answer to this is that Myrdal has a too limited view. Her point is instead that there were objective economic factors which created the basis for the development and the continuation of race prejudices which then hindered a unification, and therefore the prejudices were not rooted in abstract morals, nor were they impossible to overcome.

Bourgeois Conclusions and Solutions to the Race Problems

Dunayevskaya follows Myrdal throughout his whole work and concludes that:

Mr. Myrdal denies that “the economic factor” is the primary one in the development of society, or rather, in the existence of the Negro problem. To him the Negro problem is a moral problem arising out of the conflict between the “American creed,” that all men are created equal, and the American reality, in which the Negro minority is so unjustly treated.⁴⁴

Further on, she notes that Myrdal explains the race prejudices among the white Southerners as an effect of the entrenchment of slavery in the South. He means that slavery caused a blackout on independent thinking which was so overwhelming that Southern thought to this day suffers from it. Myrdal writes that the South is exceptional in Western non-fascist civilizations since the Enlightenment in the sense that it lacks every trace of radical thought. In other words, he claims the Southerners to be intellectually backward.⁴⁵ Dunayevskaya demonstrates that after

⁴³ Ibid. (this is too a quote from p. 68 in Myrdal’s study).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ After the publication of the book, Myrdal was asked by a journalist how the book was received in the South. Myrdal then simply responded with that “They don’t read books.” Hamilton, C. & Hamilton, H. ”Gunnar Myrdal visade rasismen i USA:s hjärta” in *Dagens Nyheter* 2020-06-07.

Myrdal the social scientist has explained this, then Myrdal the liberal politician appears. She quotes him when he, as if he was speaking to Southern politicians, writes that “changes should, if possible not be made by sudden upheavals but in gradual steps” and that, if it feels too much to give all Blacks full Civil Rights, then they can, Myrdal advises, begin by enfranchising at least “the higher strata of the Negro population.”⁴⁶ In this respect, his anti-Marxism and bourgeois class interest appear in full daylight and, Dunayevskaya adds, here it is of interest to note that the sponsor of his study is the Carnegie Corporation.

Heidegren concludes, too, that Myrdal believes that the racism in the South first of all is a moral problem, which in turn is to be understood as that white Americans are hypocrites. In other words, white Americans do not live up to their so-called American creed, which can be summarized in the thought that “America *is* the land of the free, *is* the land of equal opportunity, *is* the safeguard for human dignity, and *is* the home of democracy.” Heidegren writes that Myrdal still thinks it is possible to solve the race problems and explains further that Myrdal is inspired by the Swedish philosopher Axel Hägerström, who is most famous for his development of the doctrine of value nihilism, rooted in Max Weber. It falls outside this study to go further into what the doctrine of value nihilism entails, but very briefly summarized it implies an idea that evaluative judgments cannot be true or false. Such judgments are instead thought of only as expressions of our preferences. Thus, Hägerström famously said that “there can never be any teaching *in* morality, only *on* morals.”⁴⁷ As an admirer of Hägerström, Myrdal let his analysis be influenced by Hägerström’s logic when he discussed how via an immanent critique American society could solve its race problems. Heidegren writes that Myrdal believed in change but that it would not come about by itself. Instead, Myrdal argued that:

First of all, a change must take hold in the mind of the whites; indeed such a change is, according to Myrdal, well under way through the decay of the caste theory which says that people are born in such and such a way and that this cannot be changed. Secondly, such a change must be supported by an active policy of rational planning and social engineering.⁴⁸

To conclude, Myrdal consider that the problem is moral, that white people are hypocrites, and that the solution is that the state should intervene and spread the American creed to all people, so that whites can get rid of their bad moral standards and Blacks can take part in the American creed. Basically, Myrdal’s suggestion is that more of the American creed, more of

⁴⁶ Quoted from pp. 518-9 in Myrdal’s study.

⁴⁷ Heidegren, C.-G. (2015). p. 222.

⁴⁸ Heidegren, C.-G. (2015). p. 226.

liberal capitalism, is the solution. Dunayevskaya, on the other side, locates the roots of the problem in capitalism. She analyses capitalism as a system that inevitably produces an underclass and that this is the root of race prejudices in capitalist society today. Thus, for Dunayevskaya the solution to the race problems in America is not more capitalism, but the overthrow of it.

A significant difference in their respective views is that Dunayevskaya does not dismiss the white Southern workers as intellectually backward, which Myrdal does. Instead, being influenced by Marx and Lenin, she finds economic roots to the continuation of the white workers' race prejudice. In doing so, she opens up the potential for change. Thus, according to Dunayevskaya, the most oppressed layers of the working class can develop a consciousness of how the capitalist system produces antagonistic human relations, and how the potential revolution to overthrow class relations will necessitate a change in race relations.

The Vitality and Validity of the Blacks' Independent Struggle

In the important article *Resolution of the Minority on the Negro Question*, written by James in January 1945, James lays out a profound and original analysis of the relationship between the proletarian movement and the Black movement. He starts by drawing out the history of this relationship, because he thinks that the significant role played by Blacks in the revolutionary tradition in the US has been neglected by historians.

In the first paragraphs he explains that the role of the Blacks was decisive in the American revolution in 1776 as soon as the actual revolutionary struggle began. His opinion is that the Blacks compelled the revolutionary white bourgeoisie to include the rights of Blacks among the rights of man, and as soon as they did, the Blacks themselves answered by playing a powerful part in the military struggle of the revolution. However, during the first decades of the 1800s, the Blacks found themselves disappointed with the results of the revolution and therefore staged a continuous series of revolts.

By 1831 the white middle class intellectuals in the North entered a period of widespread egalitarian and humanitarian agitation, forming a large Abolitionist movement. At this time, many Blacks in the rural South escaped via the so-called underground railroad to the more industrialized North and where they joined with the free Blacks there, and soon the petty-bourgeois movement for the rights of man became dominated by the struggle for the abolition of slavery. This new development of American democracy posed a threat to the Southern plantocracy. James writes:

The importance of the Negroes as a revolutionary force has grown with the development of the American economy. Conversely, however, racial prejudice against the Negroes has also grown. Between 1830 and 1860 the Southern planters cultivated the theory of Negro inferiority to a degree far exceeding that of earlier slavery days, being driven to do this by increasing divergences between the developing bourgeois democracy in the United States and the needs of the slave economy. To conquer the formidable threat of white and Negro unity, particularly that represented by Populism, the Southern plantocracy elevated race consciousness to the position of a principle. The whole country was injected with this idea. Thus, side by side with his increasing *integration* into production which becomes more and more a social process, the Negro becomes more than ever conscious of his *exclusion* from democratic privileges as a separate racial group in the community. *This dual movement is the key to the Marxist analysis of the Negro question in the U.S.A.*⁴⁹

What James expresses here is that racism has nothing to do with any form of “natural” prejudice, but that it is a socially constructed idea supported by the dominant classes, used in order to split the dominated classes, the Blacks and the white proletariat, and to hinder them from uniting and posing a threat to the capitalist mode of production.

The Black Struggle as a National Question

In the same way as Dunayevskaya conceived of it, James also conceived of the Black’s struggle as a National struggle. He writes that the (at that time) 14 million Blacks in the US are subjected to every conceivable variety of economic, social, and political discrimination, but that the Blacks are and have for centuries, in every sense of the word, been Americans. He brings to the fore that the Blacks in America are not separated from their oppressors by differences of culture, religion, language, or anything like that, unlike many oppressed peoples in Asia and in Africa. Likewise he adds that the Blacks in America are not even geographically separated from the rest of the community, as the national groups are in Russia, Spain, and Yugoslavia. But moving to their special situation, the segregation in economic, social, and political terms, and the difference in color which singles out them so easily from the rest of the community, the problem the Blacks face in America becomes that of a national minority.

James writes that due to the Blacks’ objective place as the most oppressed section of the labor force, they make up the part of that American society which is most receptive to

⁴⁹ Johnson, J. R. [pseudonym for C. L. R. James] (1945). *Resolution of the Minority on the Negro Question*, p. 275.

revolutionary ideas and a radical solution of social problems. James also points out the difference between the white proletariat's struggle and the Blacks' struggle. He writes:

The white working class struggles against the objective rule of capital and for some subjective goal, which even on the very eve of revolution, is impossible to visualize fully in concrete and positive terms. The Negroes, on the other hand, struggle and will continue to struggle objectively against capital, but in contrast to the white workers, for the very concrete objective democratic rights that they see around them.⁵⁰

James's point that the Blacks' independent struggle for democratic rights does challenge the objective rule of capital, is correct if one accepts Marx's delineation of the tendency of the capitalist system to always produce an underclass. Black people's rejection of their oppressed situation and their struggle for democratic rights are therefore challenging this feature of capitalism, and their rejection of their position as an underclass carries the potential to challenge the whole class society in itself. Therefore, the Blacks' struggle for democratic rights is a struggle against the objective rule of capital. Moreover, as James notes:

But the whole history of the United States and the role of the Negroes in American economy and society are a constant proof and reminder of the fact that it is absolutely impossible for the Negroes to gain equality under American capitalism.⁵¹

What James means is that those who dismiss the Black struggle for their objective democratic rights as a non-revolutionary struggle fail to comprehend the objective class position of Blacks. James's argument is thus that the survival of the American capitalist system is dependent upon having 14 million oppressed Black workers at its disposal. Therefore, Blacks cannot gain equality under American capitalism, and thus, James concludes:

Such is the development of American capitalist society and the role of Negroes in it that the Negroes' struggle for democratic rights bring the Negroes almost immediately face to face with capital and the state. The Marxist support of the Negro struggle for democratic rights is not a concession that Marxists make to the Negroes. In the United States today this struggle is a direct part of the struggle for socialism.⁵²

The primary inspirational source for James's analysis of the independent role of the Black's struggle is also the writing of Lenin on the colonial and the National Question. James specifically looks at a study Lenin did on the first Russian revolution of 1905. In it, Lenin

⁵⁰ Johnson, J. R. (1945), p. 277.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, (in italics in original.)

⁵² *Ibid.*

concluded that the revolution was a bourgeois-democratic revolution against the rule of the Tsar. The revolution then contained a series of battles in which all discontented classes, groups, and oppressed elements of the population participated. Thus, the mass movement that finally would overcome tsarism was made up not only of proletarians, but also of petty-bourgeois, of peasants, and of other social layers too. Lenin notes that these groups had a wide variety of goals and aims, and that some of them had the crudest prejudices against each other. But *objectively*, Lenin means, the different discontented classes contradicted the Tsar and together, as a mass movement, they broke the back of tsarism and paved the way for democracy. Lenin's argument was that it is only a mass movement that can achieve a social revolution. Therefore, he thought that a socialist revolution cannot be anything else than an outburst of mass struggle in which all oppressed elements of society burst out. Without participations from all elements, mass struggle is impossible, and without a mass struggle, no revolution is possible.

Inevitably, these groups will bring into the movement their prejudices, their reactionary fantasies, their weaknesses and error, but *objectively* they will attack *capital*. James then argues that a social revolution in the US will be impossible without the independent struggles of the Blacks. Blacks have for three and a half centuries been so intertwined into the American economy and made up the poorest and most oppressed segment, that without them, a mass movement is impossible. However, on its own, the Black movement is powerless against American capitalism. This is because Blacks do not make up a numerical majority and so do not have the chance to take control of the means of production, which would be needed to be shut down in order to seriously challenge American capitalism. James here quotes Lenin, as Dunayevskaya also did in her article, on that:

The dialectic of history is such that small nations, powerless as an INDEPENDENT factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which help the REAL power against imperialism to come on the scene, namely, the SOCIALIST PROLETARIAT.⁵³

The model for revolution that emerges from James's writings, as in Dunayevskaya's, is therefore a two fold model for revolution. The model implies an independent movement fighting for democratic rights which inspires and brings on to the scene the socialist proletariat who can shut down the factories and production plants, and together, as a mass movement, they can move forward toward a social revolution.

⁵³ Ibid.

The unique and original contribution in James's analysis is first of all the stress on the independent vitality and validity of the Black struggle. In James's analysis, the Black struggle has, as opposed to what others had said before him, a very important role in the struggle for a social revolution, one that cannot be thought of as contradictory, less important, or irrelevant. Therefore, James concludes by saying that:

Thus it is utterly false to draw the conclusion that the independent struggle of the Negro masses for their democratic rights is to be looked upon merely as a preliminary stage to a recognition by the Negroes that the real struggle is the struggle for socialism.⁵⁴

James's final answer is that the Black struggle for democratic rights objectively attacks capital, and that without it no mass movement is possible, and that without a mass movement, a social revolution is not possible. Therefore, the role of the labor movement in relation to the Black movement is to fully support it and to recognize it as a vital independent movement with a validity of its own. And James means that it is only by concrete acts of support that the labor movement deserves the attention of the Black movement. Therefore, he writes:

Under no circumstances does it [the labor movement] submerge the specific purpose of this alliance in the minds of the Negro people under any general terms of the fight for socialism. This recognition by the masses of the Negro people that organized labor is their ally in their struggle for their democratic rights can prove a far more powerful step toward socialism than the acceptance by a few Negroes of the theoretic principles of Marxism.⁵⁵

Black Chauvinism, a Dubious Concept

On the topic of Black chauvinism, James writes in the same article, that it is a trend that is so clear that even the bourgeois are recognizing it. James quotes a paragraph from Myrdal's study in which Myrdal noted that Blacks today are beginning to form a self-consciousness as a nation within the nation. However, James writes that there is a fundamental difference in Black and in white chauvinism. Black chauvinism, he writes, is merely the natural excess of the desire for equality. White chauvinism, on the other hand, is an expression of racial domination, and therefore, it is essentially reactionary. He means that Black chauvinism is

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, (in italics in original.)

⁵⁵ Johnson, J. R. (1945). p. 279. (first sentence of the quote is in italics in the original.) A somewhat similar idea was expressed in a letter to Friedrich Engels written by Karl Marx on August 7, 1862. In it, Marx was calling for Black troops to be enrolled by the Union army during the American Civil War and said that "One single Negro regiment would have a remarkable effect on Southern nerves." Marx here, again, used a racist expression to express an anti-racist position.

something to expect given the centuries of slavery and brutal history of oppression that Blacks have suffered, and he writes:

Such a movement [Black chauvinist movement] with such deep historical roots must inevitably bring exaggerations, excesses, and ideological trends for which the only possible name is chauvinism. This trend undoubtedly has dangers. Marxism both in theory and in practice has demonstrated that the only way to overcome them is to recognize its fundamentally progressive tendency and to distinguish sharply between the chauvinism of the oppressed and the chauvinism of the oppressor.⁵⁶

What he therefore thinks is needed is to educate the organized labor movement as a whole on the legitimacy of the feelings of the great masses of the Black people and on the necessary contribution their struggle for democratic rights can bring to the struggle for socialism.

Black Masses as Vanguard

Two decades later, Dunayevskaya started to use the concept of “Black masses as vanguard.”⁵⁷ The idea of Black masses as vanguard should not be conflated with the idea of a vanguard party that leads and directs the masses. What Dunayevskaya meant with vanguard in this sense really goes back to Marx and his concept of alienation. As an oppressed group the Blacks are alienated, in fact deeply alienated. The term alienation was used by Hegel when he described a situation of self-estrangement. Marx famously picked it up and used it as a key concept in his writings. The opposite of alienation for both Hegel and Marx is self-activity. Emancipation from alienation is therefore self-activity. It goes without saying that self-activity is something no one else can do for you, just because it is a *self*-activity. When the Black masses then act as vanguard, they are not leading anyone else, but instead act as an inspirational force that is showing what is possible and, by doing that, make others want to liberate themselves from their own self-estrangement too.

This is a serious rethinking of what the concept of vanguard means. James had in his book on Toussaint L’Ouverture studied the slave uprising in Haiti. He noted that the French revolution must have had a crucial impact on the slaves who would soon become revolutionaries. It was not a direct impact in the sense that men from the French revolution came over and physically helped the slaves win, but that the message of the French revolution spread to Haiti, and along with that followed a hope of change and a notion of freedom that

⁵⁶ Johnson, J. R. (1945). p. 281.

⁵⁷ Dunayevskaya, R. (2003). *American Civilization on Trial: Black Masses as Vanguard*, News & Letters: Chicago. The first edition appeared in 1963.

set off the revolutionary consciousness among the slaves. Lenin expressed a similar thought when he discussed the Russian revolution of 1917. He saw that the Irish Easter rebellion of 1916 had a crucial impact on the Russian revolutionaries the year after. Thus, there was a connection of some sort. And here, it was again not a question of material support from the Irish to the Russians, but instead that the Irish rebellion inspired the Russians to come forth, by weakening imperialism and undermining the war.⁵⁸

This idea of vanguard means that James and Dunayevskaya would not limit themselves to any slogan saying something like “Black and white - unite and fight.” They would rather have criticized it because it would seem to suggest that the particularities of each self-estrangement would get subsumed under one abstraction of an oppression that would affect all. Instead, Dunayevskaya and James mean that it is of utter importance to see the self-developing subject’s struggle to emancipate itself from its self-estrangement. It is in that way they argue for the centrality of the Black struggle in their overall Marxist analysis. They were the first to do so, because no one had worked out anything similar before.

⁵⁸ It is possible that they, both Lenin and the Johnson-Forest tendency, could have found inspiration for this idea in Hegel’s works. In *Philosophy of Mind*, from 1817, Hegel stated that “When individuals and nations have once got in their heads the abstract concept of full-blown liberty, there is nothing like it in its uncontrollable strength, just because it is the very essence of mind, it’s very actuality.”

PART 3: Hegel, Dialectics, and the 1949-51 Letters

In February 1949, James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee start a correspondence that begins as a discussion on Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, but evolves into a discussion about theoretical issues, aims, and methods. Usually, it was Lenin's earlier writings that Marxists at this time read, but the Johnson-Forest tendency finds greater interest in his later writings, and especially in his notes on Hegel. The correspondence lasted for almost two years, although the most of it took place during the spring of 1949, and resulted in 35 letters.⁵⁹ The original purpose of the correspondence was to discuss a joint book, which would turn out to never be written. However, Dunayevskaya considered this correspondence of great importance. At the end of her life, she even wrote three autobiographical accounts of it where she stresses the important impact that this correspondence had on them.⁶⁰

Lenin's so-called *Philosophical Notebooks* are a collection of notes, summaries, comments and small pieces of text that Lenin wrote between 1895 and 1916. They cover works by Aristotle, Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, and others. The notes make up around 640 pages in total and can today be found in English translation in Vol. 38 of the *Collected Works of Lenin*. Yet, at the time when the Johnson-Forest tendency found them, the late 1940s, they did not exist in English translation, but only in the original Russian edition, and in a German and a French translation. The French translation had been made in the 1930s by Norbert Guterman, to which Guterman and the French Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre wrote a long and appreciative foreword.

The first three letters in the Johnson-Forest tendency's correspondence concern the notes Lenin took on Hegel's *Science of Logic*.⁶¹ Lenin wrote those notes between 1914-16, just after the outbreak of WWI and the German Social Democratic party's vote for approval of war

⁵⁹ These letters were stored on microfilm at Wayne State University's Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, in Detroit, Michigan. The archives have recently been digitalized and are now available for free online. See more at <https://rayadunayevskaya.org>.

⁶⁰ See "Reflections on Notes from a Diary: Lenin's *Philosophic Notebooks* and the State-Capitalist Tendency" (1978), *Raya Dunayevskaya Collection*, pp. 5678-88; *25 Years of Marxist-Humanism in the US* (1980), *Raya Dunayevskaya Collection*, pp. 6383-6410; Phillips and Dunayevskaya, *The Coal Miners' General Strike of 1949-50 and the Birth of Marxist-Humanism in the US* (1984), *Raya Dunayevskaya Collection*, pp. 8123-73.

⁶¹ *Science of Logic* is the work in which Hegel outlined his vision of logic as a system of dialectics that concerns a development of the principle that thought and being constitute a single active unity. With *Science of Logic* he wanted to replace formal logic with a dialectical one which catches the principle of development of both thought and reality.

credits. Each of the three first letters of the 1949-51 correspondence are written by Dunayevskaya to James, but they were shared with Lee. The background to the letters is that Dunayevskaya had just decided to translate Lenin's notes on the *Science of Logic* completely into English and writes to James about what she found there.

First Letter: Leaps, Essence and Appearance

In the first letter of February 18, 1949, Dunayevskaya notes that Lenin, when writing about the part of the *Science of Logic* entitled *Doctrine of Being*, is again and again emphasizing the notion of Leap (translated by Hegel's translators as Jump) that which Hegel stresses. She notes that Lenin says as conclusion that "gradualness explains nothing without leaps." In other words, Lenin is writing here about the nature of development which contains leaps, which means that at one point development in the realm of Being makes a qualitative change. This makes Lenin's thought so exciting! The reason that Dunayevskaya and Lenin see this discussion of leaps as so important is that it seems to suggest that change is not incremental, but revolutionary. Thus, communism would not come from reform, but a revolutionary rupture.

She then writes that Lenin is engaging in thinking about the nature of the notions "appearance" and "essence" and seems to develop a thought that what simply appears in the world also must have an objective status. She refers for her interpretation to Lenin's statement that:

Is not this the thought, that appearance is also objective, since it is one of the sides of the objective world? Not only Wesen, but also Schein are objective. Even the distinction between subjective and objective has its limits.⁶²

The German words Wesen and Schein are in most English editions translated as essence and appearance. That Dunayevskaya does not see this thinking about essence and appearance as a question of academic hairsplitting becomes clear out of her remark in this letter that the different ways of interpretation of and dealing with these notions by Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg did lead to a different conception, and thus different consequences, of imperialism.⁶³ One of the consequences concerns the role of the subjective forces in and

⁶² Dunayevskaya to James (Feb. 18, 1949). *On Lenin's Notebooks on Hegel's Science of Logic (Doctrine of Being)*, p. 1597.

⁶³ Rosa Luxemburg was a Polish Marxist, philosopher, economist, and anti-war activist. Luxemburg debate with Lenin and developed a position which did not emphasize the subjective forces in the colonies to the same extent as Lenin did.

against imperialism. We see here that Dunayevskaya had an eye for how Lenin is developing the dialectic in his reading of Hegel.

After dealing with leap, essence and appearance Dunayevskaya goes over to Lenin's thinking of method and brings to the fore that:

...the concretes which Lenin had in mind when he was reading Logic were both the economic conditions – Capital plus the Imperialism he was going to work out – and Ideology of the Bernsteins, Kautskys, and yes, Rosa Luxemburg...⁶⁴

We see here a tremendous initial impetus to the intellectual development of the Johnson-Forest tendency giving way to breaking away from the crude and mechanical way that the concept of base and superstructure is often misunderstood in Marxism and going over to conceive of race, class, and capitalism in a new way. They were going to understand that racism was a phenomenon that helped them to reveal the complex essence of capitalism, and thus should not be dismissed. In other words, although they had an analysis of the economic roots of racism, they understood it different as only to reduce it to class. Rather, they conceived of anti-racism and anti-capitalism in a new dialectical relationship.

Second Letter: Law and Relation

The second letter in the correspondence, written a week later on February 25, 1949, analyses the part of Lenin's notes that cover the next part in Hegel's *Science of Logic, The Doctrine of Essence*. Here, Dunayevskaya starts by discussing how Lenin considered that there is a need for working out the dialectic in the concrete. Lenin wrote in his notes that:

The continuation of the work of Hegel and Marx must consist in the dialectical working out of the history of human thought, science and technique.⁶⁵

Furthermore, Dunayevskaya notes that Lenin, the materialist, discusses how "technique," of which Lenin think determines the relations of production and generally the whole intellectual development, is in fact also a product of thinking. Actually, this means that thought for Lenin is not only a product of economic relations, but also that thought contributes to producing economic relations.

Further on in the letter comes a rather complicated but important passage in which Dunayevskaya discusses the possibility of transcending laws. Hegel has a section in *The Doctrine of Essence* in which he discusses laws, and Lenin, she notes, is studying these pages

⁶⁴ Dunayevskaya to James (Feb. 18, 1949), p. 1597.

⁶⁵ Dunayevskaya to James (Feb. 25, 1949). *On Lenin's Notebooks on Logic (Doctrine of Essence)*, p. 1599.

painstakingly. Dunayevskaya quotes Hegel saying that “the principle of self-movement consists of nothing else but the exhibition of contradiction,” and she refers to Lenin’s quote of Hegel that “Motion is existent contradiction” (Lenin’s underlining). With these statements of Hegel and Lenin’s emphasizing she starts to reflect on the law of motion of capitalist society. She follows Lenin in his notes who is engaging in the same question. Lenin goes back to a passage in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* in which Hegel analyzed law and proceeded to the Science of Logic for further analysis of “law” in Hegel’s work.

Then follows what for Dunayevskaya is the key sentence of what Lenin is quoting from Hegel, “The determination of Law has thus changes Law itself.” And she writes that in *Science of Logic* “Hegel proceeds to show what it was ‘at first,’ what it became as ‘negative intro-Reflection’ developed it and concludes ‘Thus Law is Essential Relation.’” In these Hegel-quotes by Lenin it is Lenin who emphasizes essential relations and it is this what “brings us precisely to the comprehension of law in the sense in which Marx uses ‘absolute general law,’ which can only be abrogated by the mediation of the proletariat establishing different social relations.”

Basically, the idea that Dunayevskaya concerns in Lenin’s notes, is the notion that what Hegel calls the negation of the negation. In Hegel’s writings, the dialectic as movement of history takes the form of a double negation. To exemplify what that means, we have the assumption that an idea or a social form contains a contradiction or contradictions. This contradiction is the basis and from that develops a first negation. In Hegel’s view this is for example the stage where consciousness is still at the level of sense-certainty and faces different impressions and tries to pin them down, as described by him in the opening chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is important here to see that Hegel means that it is an immanent critique that the idea, consciousness, or the social form take toward absolute negation. Thus, it is *not* a force coming from outside. In the first chapters of *Phenomenology of Spirit* the negations are instead posed by consciousness itself.

I wrote above that Hegel’s dialectic represents a movement of or in history. We saw how Dunayevskaya was engaging in Lenin’s interpretation of the dialectic in Hegel’s thinking in order to get grip of the law of motion of capitalist society and its transcendence. Actually, Lenin was discovering through his engagement with Hegel’s thinking, what we can call, following Hegel, ‘the negation of the negation’ but now, in Lenin, as a law of Marxian dialectics in capitalist society.

Marx had already explicitly pointed to the importance of “the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle” and limitation of Hegel’s notion of the negation of the negation in his *1844 Manuscripts*:

But because Hegel had conceived the negation of the negation, from the point of view of the positive relation inherent in it, as the true and only positive, and from the point of view of the negative relation in it as the only true act and self-realizing act of all being, he has only found the *abstract, logical, speculative* expression for the movement of history; which is not yet the *real* history of man – of man as given subject, but only of man’s act of creation – the *story* of man’s *origin*.⁶⁶

In the end of the letter Dunayevskaya praises Hegel as a revolutionary thinker. She finds a passage where he defined identity as “nothing but unseparated difference,” and thinks that this is a fantastic example stating the brilliance of his thinking. That identity is nothing but unseparated difference simply means that nothing that appears solid like for example US racism, is free of contradictions. You need only to closely investigate an object, and you will soon find contradictions in its identity, and when those contradictions are exposed then the identity breaks up and collapses. All that seems solid, any identity, will break up and melt into air. “Always it is: Connection, relation, mediation, necessity, motion, unity of opposites, break-up of identity, transition and motion, motion and transition, and that is totality” Dunayevskaya concludes. Hegel’s logic moves, and every law or natural condition that we have thought of as eternal will eventually collapse.

Third Letter: The Importance of Practice

The third letter is written March 12, 1949. Dunayevskaya writes that James, who seems to have expressed a somewhat different idea of Lenin’s interpretation of Hegel, deserves to be the first one to see her now completed translation of Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*, since James was the one who introduced her to Lenin and dialectics. Dunayevskaya states that in Lenin’s notes on the third and final part of Hegel’s *Science of Logic, Doctrine of Notion*, Lenin was thinking about his own age and was searching for a new universal that could

⁶⁶ This is a quote from the third part, the “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy in General,” of Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*. It states that Marx thinks that Hegel only worked out the dialectic in the abstract, while he on the other hand aims to work it out in the concrete. The quote can be found here: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/hegel.htm>

emerge out of it.⁶⁷ He looked at the Russian masses and the Soviets, the workers' councils, and concluded that their new universal is 'State and Revolution.'⁶⁸

She then writes that in Lenin's reading of the *Science of Logic*, he concludes that Leaps characterize his understanding of the *Doctrine of Being*, Law as essential relation in his grasp of the *Doctrine of Essence*, and that Practice characterizes his profound analysis of the *Doctrine of Notion*. Dunayevskaya means that these three aspects, leap, law, and practice exemplify fundamental aspects of dialectical reasoning. To illustrate this, she quotes Lenin who is saying that "The dialectic road to cognition of truth is from living observation to abstract thinking and from this to practice." This, she means, is about trying to explain how history changes and how humans play an active part in it. Dunayevskaya sums up Lenin's thinking here as follows:

His whole emphasis on the End, and Subjective notion is that the aims of mans are generated by the objective world but that the changes, subjectively desires change and acts; there he goes so far as to call the objective world non-actual and the desires of man actual, and the reason he hangs on so to the Idea is that 'it not only has the dignity of a universal, but also the simply actual.'⁶⁹

It is in this third moment, in the realm of notion, that subject finally appears. So, we see that this way of thinking of Dunayevskaya about subject within a Marxist context for the Johnson-Forest tendency opens the possibility for a new, not class reductionist Marxist orientation for analyzing the Black movement as a new passion and a new force in the struggle for a human liberation. Provocatively, and to the aggravation of some, Lenin means that one needs first to fully comprehend the whole of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, before one can fully understand Marx's *Capital*. This means that Lenin has now made a decisive break from crude materialism.

The reason why Dunayevskaya brings to the fore to James the above mentioned aspects connected with Notion and above all her emphasizing of the role of subject is that the Johnson-Forest tendency in her age has the experience of the development in the Soviet Union and because of that the contradictions of Trotskyism which have to be overcome.

⁶⁷ A "new universal" in this context can be understood as a new general principle of production, or rather a new society.

⁶⁸ State and Revolution was a book Lenin wrote in 1917 in which he described the inherent nature of the state as a tool for class oppression. At the same time, he saw that the Russian masses organizing and declared that the task of the revolution is to smash the state.

⁶⁹ Dunayevskaya to James (March 12, 1949). *On Lenin's Notebooks on Logic (Doctrine of Notion)*, p. 1603.

Her study of these aspects about which Lenin thought and wrote result in her “dying to get down to apply” them on the American economy and on Marx’s *Capital*.

Preparing a Letter to Herbert Marcuse: Lenin’s Working Out of the Dialectic

Three days later, on May 17, 1949, Dunayevskaya writes to James again. This time she talks about a letter they are planning to write to Marcuse. The letter will be about what they have found in Lenin’s notes, and she discusses which aspects that they should include in it. The red thread that Dunayevskaya sees running through Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks* is:

...the actualization of the “dialectic proper” as the disintegration of the order and its categories on the one hand and the self-activity of the masses and creation of a new social order on the other hand.⁷⁰

She means that the ideas presented in Hegel’s *Science of Logic* become for Lenin a theory of knowledge which sees the necessary connection of all objective sides of a phenomenon, and the immanent emergence of differences. Moreover, she holds that it is possible to follow Lenin step by step in how he applied the keys of the dialectic when he worked out his theory of imperialism, i.e. it is possible to follow him on how his study of the objective situation was connected with his philosophical studies. His original conclusion, she writes, contrary to other tendencies of his time, was that:

...it is the concentration of production which led to monopoly out of which imperialism was born. Lenin stresses that these are the “steps in the rise of finance-capital and the notion contained in the term.” (My [Dunayevskaya’s] emphasis) That is to say, Hilferding by giving finance capital the predominance has failed to show how the financial oligarchy arose, just as the Narodniki had failed to show how surplus value was realized and thus both remained in the market, rather than sticking to production both in its expansion and in its concentration.⁷¹

But to Lenin, who saw the totality of the various sides of imperialism and did see imperialism grew out of capitalism as an immanent development, imperialism represents a certain stage of capitalism. Namely, “when its [capitalism’s] essential qualities became transformed into their

⁷⁰ Dunayevskaya to James (May 17, 1949). *On Lenin and the “Actualization of the Dialectic Proper,”* p. 1607.

⁷¹ Dunayevskaya to James (May 17, 1949). p. 1607. Rudolf Hilferding had written the book entitled *Daz Finanzkapital* in 1910 in which he argued that since Marx’s time, finance capital had grown and started to dominate industrial capital. The Narodniki-movement was a politically organized part of the Russian intelligentsia in the latter part of the 19th century. They fought for a kind of agrarian socialism, and opposed capitalism and industrialization.

opposites,” that is, when competition turns into monopoly. Thus, here is an observation of a negation by Lenin, the dialectician.

Lenin, she notes, never seems tired of stressing his dialectical conclusions. For this Dunayevskaya refers in this letter to Lenin’s dialectical notion of the commodity and sums it up as:

The form of value, where Marx “flirted” with the dialectic is full of one thing manifesting itself as its opposite: use value appears as its opposite, value; concrete labor as its opposite, abstract labor; private labor as its opposite, social labor; and this constant transition of one into the other creating ever deeper contradictions and antagonisms out of which new relations are born.⁷²

Then follows a passage where Dunayevskaya summarizes Lenin’s discussion on imperialism:

What Lenin seems to be saying is that with the Marxists of the past century the repetition that the fetishistic form of a product of labor as a commodity hides the social relations of men was a mere ritual and because of that they, in their age, failed to see that the fetishistic form of appearance of the concentration of production as monopoly-capital on which imperialism was built hid the socialization of labor and hence imperialism as “the eve of the revolution”. Because they failed to grasp this they separated politics from economics.⁷³

In this sense, the Marxists of the past century, also failed to analyze seriously the national liberation movements, let alone race and class problems in countries like the US. Quite thrilled about what she found, Dunayevskaya claims that this point that Lenin makes about the previous Marxists also applies to Marxists at the time of his imperialism studies such as Kautsky, Bukharin, and even to Trotsky. Their mistake was that they used economic concepts such as wage laborer, commodities, money, etc., i.e. fetishized concepts, as mere given concepts.

The idea which Dunayevskaya discusses that Lenin is moving toward, is that the proletariat, in its struggle against capitalism, can be juxtaposed to consciousness struggle on the path of despair toward knowing the truth of the objects and itself, as outlined in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In a sense the proletariat’s struggle for emancipation is also a struggle for self-knowledge and struggle to know what the nature of the objects is. At this moment they have one yardstick, in this case political economy, with which they define the world and themselves. But this yardstick seems to not hold. Contradictions emerges because

⁷² Dunayevskaya to James (May 17, 1949). p. 1608.

⁷³ Ibid.

in capitalism they are treated as things, and they resist. Marx pointed out in section 4 *The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secrets Thereof* in chapter 1 of *Capital, Vol. 1*, that when concrete human labor is abstracted into value, then human relations take the form of a relationship between things. Dunayevskaya realizes that everywhere in the realm of appearances in the bourgeois world, there exists these fetishized objects, the commodities, including labor power as a commodity. Marx's great contribution was that he investigated and sorted out the being of commodities in capitalism and found out that commodities appear in a fetishistic form that hides their essence, which is abstract labor, which in turn is a relation between humans that parallels a relation between things. Dunayevskaya thinks that the consciousness of the proletariat can, by negating the fetishized objects, realize their true essence in the bourgeois world, and transcend it. That means that they have the potential to get rid of the old yardstick in other words, and create a notion of a new way of life, one where human relations are truly human and are not mediated by the abstraction of value and thus does not take the form of relations between things. To conclude, Dunayevskaya argues that the proletariat can transform the ideal into the real and put an end to the ordered chaos of capitalism.

Furthermore, Dunayevskaya, in taking up self-knowledge and the nature of objects is pointing to what this means for Lenin's thinking about subjectivity and objectivity:

That is why he paid so much attention in his notes to the section, the Idea, in Hegel's Logic, stressing that the best of the dialectic is there. His profound grasp of the subjectivity in the objective, and the objectivity of the subjective is seen best of course in the State and Revolution.⁷⁴

These thoughts of Lenin would also have consequences for his reading of *Capital*, of issues he had not seen before in it. Finally, Dunayevskaya suggests James to include a list of the specific references Lenin made in his reading of the section, The Idea, in the letter to Marcuse.

Note to Grace Lee: Active Masses

On May 18, 1949, Dunayevskaya writes a short letter to Lee. At the end of the letter she concludes that it seems to her that they have to get toward a different relationship of masses to philosophy. She writes that previously James, Lee and she used to keep on repeating that Kant, years before the French revolution, worked out the bourgeois mode of thought.

⁷⁴ Dunayevskaya to James (May 17, 1949). pp. 1608-9.

Dunayevskaya concludes that they are turning toward a notion of a philosophy that sees a much greater role of the masses in the production of new ideas. The philosophers are thus rather the ones who express the ideas that the masses prepare the ground for. She clears this up with a reference to James's thinking:

It seems to me also that with J's [James's] working out of the Puritan Revolution, we get a different relationship of masses to philosophy than we got when we kept on repeating that Kant for years before the French Revolution worked out the bourgeois mode of thought, n'est-ce pas? In other words while working out the philosophic relationship of materialism and dialectics which will explain Lenin and also us – where were the masses in 1908 when Lenin tackled philosophy for the first time and where in 1915?⁷⁵

What Dunayevskaya is stating here is that the concrete practices of the masses create something new which the philosophers transform and express in new ideas. Because the analysis of this process demands a philosophical working out, besides an economic analysis, Dunayevskaya turned to Lee, for Lee was the “philosophical mind” within the Johnson-Forest tendency.

Later, Dunayevskaya will develop more on this and spell out the idea more clearly. In her book *Marxism and Freedom* from 1958, she will write that there is not a single idea in the heads of the intellectuals that has not already been in the activity of the masses.⁷⁶ She writes this in a passage where she is discussing the impact of the French Revolution upon Hegel's generation of intellectuals in Germany. She concludes then that there is a movement from practice to theory. With other words, ideas are generated as a response to social movements and social practices. As an illustration of Dunayevskaya's way of thinking as to this issue we can refer to how she interprets Rousseau's engagement with democracy. On the basis of the studies by the French anarchist historian Daniel Guérin, she points out that the idea or notion of democracy in Rousseau had its spring in the activities in the early 1790s of the sans-culottes (radical left-wing partisans of the lower classes).

Counter Revolutions from Within and the Grounding of the Dialectic in the Concrete

On May 27, 1949, James writes a letter to Dunayevskaya which is in fact co-written by Lee. It is a longer letter that summarizes a discussion between James and Lee. It contains a

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Chapter 1 - The Age of Revolutions: Industrial, Socio-Political, Intellectual” in Dunayevskaya, R. (1958). *Marxism and Freedom: From 1776 Until Today*. Humanity Books: New York.

discussion on the history of Western philosophy up to the 1940s, via Hegel, Marx, and Lenin, in which they make an interesting claim about the sequence of the dialectics in history. They say:

There is a sequence of dialectical development, which appears in every revolutionary period. There is a conquest, a leap forward, stated first of all abstractly but in opposition to previous period. This which is an advance of the subject becomes rationalized - turning into on the one hand idealism and on the other positivism - the essence of both being that man is over here, nature is over there and the gap to be bridged somehow. This is always totalitarian. Finally a new synthesis is established.⁷⁷

They then try to exemplify this by saying that the great leap forward in the 17th century was the development of individuality. At the beginning this was revolutionary because it was a thought that united knowledge with Being. But what the philosophers of that early Enlightenment period did, Hobbes especially, was to rationalize the revolution in a counter revolutionary way. Those philosophers understood individuals in their finitude, not as developing, but as they were, and with their thoughts contributed to the creation of totalitarian systems designed to govern over them. James and Lee mean that the counter revolution signified a degeneration of the revolution into positivism, a reduction of human motives to the crudest materialism. In Hobbes's case it turned out to become the theory where Leviathan should rule over the human race who, Hobbes meant, otherwise were hopelessly trapped in a war of each against all, i.e. the so-called state of nature.

So, what happened was that after the initial revolutionary stage, when the old order was destroyed, then these philosophers contributed to the articulation of a new social order based on the crudest materialism, and then the revolution transformed into its opposite. Emancipation became tyranny. That the human essence could potentially develop on its own from the state of nature was simply not a possibility for Hobbes. But what Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke failed to recognize were the contradictions and negativity in this movement, James and Lee argues.

In fact, James and Lee add, there is a parallel of a revolution transforming into its opposite between Hobbes in the 1650s and Russia in the 1920s. Stalin was at first part of a revolutionary movement, but after he came to power he created a totalitarian system, the most merciless tyranny, based upon a view that completely rejected the development of humanity. James and Lee then say that a similar sequence can also be traced in ancient Greece as well.

⁷⁷ James and Lee (May 27, 1949). *Discussion Notes*, p. 1616.

There, the Milesians first showed a way out of pure sense-certainty. Then comes Parmenides who establishes a rationalistic principle of being-for-self with his atomistic theory, and then you can see the break away from this and a development of individuality in Socrates and Plato, and finally the establishment of a new basis and a new authority in Aristotle.

Hegel, on the other hand, opens up the way for a possible transcending of the dualism that ultimately results in totalitarianism. He does so, they argue, by reaffirming the self-acting intellect and by insisting on the process of mediation and the ultimate unity as a premise. Only then can all the contradictions be abolished.

What then follows in the letter is an important conclusion. James and Lee here describe that the dialectical movement in the realm of Being is completely different from that in the realm of Essence. They say:

The dialectical movement in the Realm of Being is constant degradation of the determinate being of the individual in his given reality to part of abstract universal. The movement is to quantity, abstract labor. The abstract principle of Being-for-self has to become this degradation, precisely because it is abstract.⁷⁸

This movement is what Hegel describes in the beginning of *Phenomenology of Spirit* where the consciousness which starts with pure sense-certainty goes through a degradation and ends up as an abstraction. It is the understanding mind that works here by tearing down. But the dialectical movement in the realm of Essence is different because there you see the expansion of the concrete individual developing a subjectivity (although, the subject in Hegel's *Science of Logic* does not fully appear until it reaches the Notion). However, in order to explain the dialectical movement in the realm of Essence, Hegel needs to show how it is that the abstract universal that he left us with in the realm of Being is actually concrete. James and Lee argue that he succeeds in doing so. They write that:

Hegel begins by insisting on the reality of Show [a false appearance or seemingly]. He will have nothing to do with the abstract essence or Being-for-Self. It is almost as if he were conducting a polemic against Being-for-Self, to establish the necessity for the universal to be concrete, from the very beginning. Then he attacks this more specifically showing how identity must become difference and therefrom opposition and contradiction. Having established this as the abstract principles of the movement, he reaffirms that the contradiction is not going to without unity, by going to ground, the principle of self-transcendence of the opposing determinations by the subject. But the moment he does this, he has to show again

⁷⁸ James and Lee (May 27, 1949). p. 1617.

that the Ground must be concrete. It has to include all the conditions to emerge into existence. Then again he insists that essence must appear, to posit and make explicit the contradiction between the appearance and the essence. Appearance as the immediacy of this essence with the contradiction posited. The whole is constantly moving to become more concrete and comprehensive – with the end, substance which will include all accidents and be the totality. That is the energizing actuality.⁷⁹

The real key phrase here is that Hegel insists on that *essence must appear*. What he means is that the appearance cannot therefore be completely disconnected from the essence. This is the decisive break with Kant and all the dualists who considered that there is an impassable barrier between what appears and its essence. No, Hegel means, that what appears even in the abstract must be grounded in the concrete.

The Importance of the Particular Experience

On July 5, 1949, Lee writes to James. She brings to the fore out of Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* that "The importance of the dialectic as method of thought is the way in which it enables us to see this counter-revolution within the revolution itself, in other words, the actual dialectics of all revolutions."⁸⁰ Her point is that in dialectical development, the actual development takes place at the level of the second negation. If this second negation does not take place, the result will be counterrevolutionary. Lee proceeds then with saying that:

The method of thought of the counter-revolution is the particularization of the universal, carrying it to the absolute like a shot out of a pistol. The permanent revolution is the overcoming of this particularization.⁸¹

And adds that:

The permanent revolution is the overcoming of this particularization.

She means that as a revolutionary, one also needs to see the negativity in the revolutionary subject. This could, obviously, include white workers who were socialists but also harbored racist feelings toward Blacks. In other words, one needs to be able to acknowledge the counter revolution in the revolution itself. Once the right-wing or the old ruling class is overthrown, then the negation of the negation must come forward; if not, one dominant class is going to be replaced with another. She refers to Schelling as a counter revolutionary figure

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Lee to James (Jul 5, 1949). *On Abstract and Concrete in Lenin*, p. 1662.

⁸¹ Lee to James (Jul 5, 1949). p. 1662. Schelling was a monist philosopher and a close friend of Hegel. Although, they shared many thoughts, Hegel also used to sharply critique Schelling for the reasons that Lee states.

and writes that he was a voluntarist with his shot-out-of-a-pistol-absolute. Lee then states that she therefore now better understands why Engels said in a letter to Kautsky that when the actual revolution begins, the most important question is not the economy. Further on she writes:

The moment that the revolution begins, the counter-revolution seeks to legalize the institutions which have been created by the masses, i.e. particularize their tasks, transform them into fixed isolated determinations.⁸²

To exemplify the point Lee is making here one should know that Hegel spent a lot of time critiquing his friend Schelling for jumping over the particular when they discussed the absolute idea. Hegel complained that Schelling thought that he could arrive at the absolute idea by skipping over the particular. Thus, to arrive at the absolute like a “shot-out-of-a-pistol.” The problem with that, Hegel thought, was that Schelling’s absolute idea then had no connection to reality, but was running the risk of becoming completely abstract, or counter revolutionary, as Lee expressed it. Instead, Hegel meant that in order to reach the absolute, one has to approach it via the particular. This is so, because Hegel argued that the essence of an object must appear for us in a particular form. He meant that there cannot be an impassable barrier between the essence of an object and how that same object appears for us. Instead, he thought that an aspect of the essence must appear in a particular form in the world of appearances.

The Johnson-Forest tendency employed this way of thinking when they worked out their analysis and when they approached experiences such as the one that Charles Denby faced when he met with the Trotskyists, as outlined on page 12 in this thesis. The Trotskyists wanted Denby to not posit his particular experience of capitalism, which was an experience marked with racism, and have that to overshadow his role as a worker. No, the Johnson-Forest tendency would argue, it is instead only via the particular experience that you can reach the universal and the absolute.

Freedom is in the Notion

On July 9, 1949, Lee writes to James and, among other things, writes about Lenin’s emphasis on the importance of the part of the Notion in Hegel’s work. Lee writes that:

⁸² Ibid.

Lenin keeps reminding himself that Notion came out of Essence which came out of Being. //...// But it was as if he [Lenin] were saying: Do not stay in the realm of Essence, inner necessity, connection. Get into the realm of Notion, freedom, revolution.⁸³

When Lenin gets into Notion, Lee argues, he plunges into freedom. Freedom is development. It means to not be stuck in a specific stage, but the possibility to grow, learn, and realize one's potential. That is freedom to Lenin, that the possibility to develop one's human potential never should be hindered.

Democracy as the Form of Mobilization for the Masses

On July 20, Dunayevskaya writes to James and explains her view on Lenin. As to Lenin's thinking, Dunayevskaya states that they have to differentiate in his thinking since his pioneering engagement with Hegel's work in 1914. Her view of Lenin implies both a praising of his discovering of the dialectics in Marx, but also a rather harsh critique in some other respects. She writes:

Of course he [Lenin] takes up the unity of opposites in imperialism and in the disputes on self-determination, but it is the unity of opposites within the notion of capitalism; he has not yet concretized the meditation; he is for civil war and break-up of the capitalist state but he can only use generalities for the new society. With Feb. 1917 - when he recognizes the Soviets as the mediation and at the same time sees that the opposition between method - proletarian - and aim - socialism - has been overcome and proletarian revolution and soviet state is content and method and form and all can be summed up in the one expression "to a man" he arrives at State and Revolution or method is pure notion.⁸⁴

What she is saying here is that Lenin in the first period, until February 1917, was in the realm of Essence and after February comes in the realm of Notion. She writes that after February 1917 Lenin's notion stems that the first chapter of *Capital* is not to understand without an understanding of Hegel's *Logic*.

Then Dunayevskaya writes a key passage that exposes what she thinks is important for James, who she thinks "sticks with the Historical Accumulation of Capital":

But what was the upshot of it all? Wasn't it the fetishism of commodities which indeed contains not only the history of capitalism but its notion? Lenin in fact will underline the fact that Capital is "The history of capitalism and the analysis of the n o t i o n s summing it up"

⁸³ Lee to James (Jul. 9, 1949). *Reply to Letter on Bukharin*, p. 1675.

⁸⁴ Dunayevskaya to James (Jul. 20, 1949). *On Lenin 1914-17*, p. 1679.

Now while you stick with his tendency of capital accumulation, I want to linger one more moment in Ch. 1 [of *Capital, Vol. I*] for that last section [*Section 4: The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secrets Thereof*] of it shows the notion both of capitalist ideologies (they have found the secret of labor as the source of all value but cannot tear off the fetishism of commodities) and the proletariat who can strip off that veil because as “freely associated men” they can treat, regulate and consciously plan production.⁸⁵

She discusses further that Lenin’s dialectical analysis now enables him to show that while imperialism transforms democracy into an illusion, it at the same time generates democratic tendencies among the masses, which accentuates the antagonism between imperialism and the masses. Thus, the masses distance themselves from monopolistic democracy by fighting for true democracy. In fact, Dunayevskaya writes that Lenin considers that democracy can become the mobilization of the masses against the state. In this framework the fight for the right to self-determination of nations in the imperialist epoch is legitimate.

Proletarian democracy will be a new type of democracy compared to bourgeois democracy. It, Lenin argues, will take us from bourgeois democracy to freedom, from state to withering away of state, from equality to full development of each. Dunayevskaya says that Lenin will never take distance from this concern.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

Many of the attacks on Marxism coming from the post-structural left claim that a Marxist analysis results in an abstract universal, be it of a white working class or a form of humanism which denies people an affirmation of their particularities, for example of racial, gender, or sexual identities. Therefore, a main focus in the post-structural tradition has been an attempt of getting hold of the particularities and state their difference. There is no question that much important knowledge, which has set out to shine light on ways that abstract universals make oppressive experiences of the marginalized invisible, has been produced within the post-structural tradition. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, often thought of as a third-wave post-colonial feminist scholar working in the post-structural tradition, has written about this issue in the context of the relation between a feminist movement in the Global South and a white liberal feminist movement in the West. In *Feminism Without Borders* Mohanty critiques white liberal feminism for an attempt to universalize a specific experience of gender oppression among white women in the West. Mohanty writes:

Through this theorization of experience, I suggest that historicizing and locating political agency is a necessary alternative to formulations of the “universality” of gendered oppression and struggles. This universality of gender oppression is problematic, based as it is on assumptions that the categories of race and class have to be invisible for gender to be visible. Claiming universality of gender oppression is not the same as arguing for the universal rights of women based on the particularities of our experiences.⁸⁶

After stating this, Mohanty argues that a feminist movement should leave behind the notion of sisterhood, used in order to construct a cross-cultural unity of women. This, she argues, is because a universal concept will never be able to cover all our differences.

In one sense one can conclude that Mohanty is correct. The dismissive attitude toward concrete particular identities was exactly what Denby faced as a Black man in the Trotskyist movement during the 1940s. The orthodox Trotskyists told him to not focus as much on racism and instead put more emphasis on the class struggle. But the problem with Mohanty’s

⁸⁶ Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press: Durham, p. 107.

statement is that it leaves little room for transcending the contradictions. Because of her rejection of dialectical development, we are left with the notion that there is no alternative to capitalism. At least no qualitative difference.

But the kind of Marxist framework that the Johnson-Forest tendency developed turns this around. Instead of dismissing particular identities, their form of Marxism is actively seeking those, as they help reveal the essence of our current society. These particular identities are the very reason for revolution, and without an abolition of all forms of oppressive structures, no new human society can be established.

This distinguishes the Johnson-Forest tendency in a number of ways. While the members of the Frankfurt School for example concluded that the modern culture industry took a major part in disorienting and passivizing the working class, and thus hindering it from developing a class consciousness, the Johnson-Forest tendency focused instead on white racism as blocking the class consciousness of white workers. For them, racism is the form of alienation and the false consciousness that estranges the dominated classes from each other and hinders them in seeing the real oppressive social relation. In other words, one of the weaknesses of the Frankfurt school is that they distanced themselves from the working class and racial minorities, and more generally from class and anti-racist theory. Already this takes away the possibility for them to analyze the relation between class and race in capitalist society, and this limits the possibility to analyze the forms of alienation in capitalist society. But to overcome this weakness, one needs to stay firm to the particular experiences and work from there towards the essence and develop a new notion of an alternative to capitalism.

The Johnson-Forest tendency's criticism of the Soviet Union, that exposed its fundamentally state-capitalist nature, points toward the conclusion that the alternative to capitalism does not imply nationalized property, abolition of market, nor redistribution according to expansive welfare programs as a viable alternative to strive for. Instead, their writings point toward an alternative to capitalism where the alienated capitalist relations of production are fundamentally transformed. In the section on the fetishism of commodities in chapter 1 of Vol. 1 of Marx's *Capital*, Marx discusses how human relations take the form of a relationship between things under capitalist production relations. Humans working under capitalism, he argues, are denied recognition as full human beings and their relations appear instead as a relation between things. They relate to each other not as full human beings, but as commodities of labor power, thus as things. The theory of state-capitalism exposed that in the Soviet Union, where indeed the free market had been perverted, the experience of laboring from the workers point of view contained no qualitative difference compared to the

experience of laboring in the free market capitalist countries in the West. The workers in the Soviet Union still performed alienated abstract labor, and human relations thus still appeared as relations between things. A real alternative, according to the Johnson-Forest tendency, would instead imply a fundamental transformation of relations of production, and thus a transcendence the value creating process which constantly reproduces thingified human relations.⁸⁷

The Relevance Today

The Johnson-Forest tendency succeeds in transcending the debate between proponents of politics of recognition vs. redistribution. They do so by theorizing that an alternative to capitalism would need a transcendence of capitalist relations of production, and thus a new society where human relations no longer take the form of a relationship between things. Instead, their goal is a society in which every human being can be recognized for his, her, or their full humanity. In this sense, the works of the Johnson-Forest tendency are outlining a need for a much deeper form of recognition; one that does not stop at representation, equal pay, etc., but one that recognizes the human potential that everyone carries but few are allowed to develop. This is the “humanism” that Dunayevskaya added to the branch of Marxism that she later developed.

Moreover, even if the Johnson-Forest tendency drew on both Marx and Lenin, the theory they produced should not be conflated with any of the different branches of Marxist-Leninism. Instead, the Johnson-Forest tendency strongly opposed anything that aired thoughts of a one-party state and a vanguard party to lead. Later on, they made their renunciatory position toward those tendencies more explicit by writing several articles, books, and statements in which they agreed with Rosa Luxemburg’s criticism of Lenin, and with her criticism on the lack of democracy after the revolution.

As to the relevance for today, I think that the work of the Johnson-Forest tendency is an important source for us today as it inspire to analyze the issues of race and class in a dialectical Marxist framework. Activists today, who have seen almost 7 decades of world development of capitalism since the Johnson-Forest first tendency developed their analysis, are now the first generation growing up facing a life with worse material conditions than their parental generation, including growing inequalities, and a consciousness of an approaching

⁸⁷ See more on this topic in Hudis, P. (2013). *Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, Haymarket Books: Chicago.

climate crisis. At the same time, this generation is unique in its highly developed anti-racist and anti-sexist consciousness. If this generation of activists seeks an analysis that is fundamentally democratic and that avoids the mistakes of skipping over the particulars, and at the same time has a capacity of pointing toward a qualitatively new and liberated human society, then, I argue, the writings of the Johnson-Forest tendency are highly relevant for further examination.

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