

The uniqueness of Marxist-Humanism

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Editor's note: Black History Month 2001 is an important moment in which to view the historic-philosophic contributions of Marxist-Humanism for the ongoing efforts to uproot this racist, sexist, class ridden society. For this reason we here publish excerpts of a Perspectives Thesis presented by Raya Dunayevskaya to a national convention of News and Letters Committees in 1963, just after the pamphlet AMERICAN CIVILIZATION ON TRIAL had come off the press. The speech was entitled "The Need to Transform Reality." We here publish excerpts of Parts 1 and 4 of the talk. The original can be found in THE RAYA DUNAYEVSKAYA COLLECTION, 3279. All emphases and titles of subheads are in the original.

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The totality of the opposition between the world of the ruled and that of the rulers is bound to explode.

The question is: what will allow the collision of the two worlds to result in a reconstruction of society on OTHER, on human beginnings? Can the future inherent in the present evolve without a theory? And, if not, where is the theory that will converge with the practice of the millions?

Naturally, we think it is Marxist-Humanism. But we must put its analysis of what is, as well as the organizational form of what is TO BE DONE, to the test.

The task is to see that, WHEN the collision occurs, the action truly transforms reality, instead of merely "chalking it up to experience," aborted attempts, still-births, unsuccessful revolutions and even successful ones that still did not continue into a new viable social order on a world scale.

Consider the new epoch which began with the great Russian Revolution of 1917, and resumed, but only to die an early death, with the Spanish Revolution of 1937. Or the age that began with the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] in the United States and ended with the Resistance movements in Europe during World War II. Or the era that began with the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, dying in Russia's Europe, but coming to life on the African continent in the very same year of DeGaulle's rise to power. Far from being thrown backwards, this continued into the Africa Year, 1960, which is also the year of the great youth demonstrations in Japan. Everywhere today we see undercurrents of revolt. In the United States this assumes open forward movement in the Freedom NOW struggles of Negroes.

This, too, however, has now reached the crossroads. Isn't it imperative that, whether we begin with the Freedom NOW movement that is presently being pressured by the Kennedy administration whose hands have been freed a bit by his nuclear co-aspirant for world power-Nikita S. Khrushchev – or whether we take the youth movement in distant Japan, the dialectical relationship of object and subject be not restricted to the objective world and the MASS force but is inclusive also of small groupings like News and Letters Committees? Philosophically, politically, organizationally, this indeed is the nub of the matter.

All history teaches us that, for want of a unity of theory and practice, there have been altogether too many unfinished revolutions, and none more unfinished than the Civil War in the United States – plus the hot-house kind of bureaucratization of the CIO.

Whether we use the word, organization, in the sense of Wendell Phillips who considered the gathering of a half-dozen men in one room DISCUSSING how to change reality as thereby signifying the first act of revolution; or we use the word, party, in the Marxian sense of an organization disciplined by a theory of liberation, and THEREFORE distinguishing itself from the masses as a whole in two respects: 1) in place of only the immediate interests of the proletariat, it holds aloft their HISTORIC interests, and 2) in place of the national viewpoint, it puts forth the INTERNATIONAL one; the point is that a grouping that is the "knowing" of the mass, its historical, international and theoretical receptacle so-to-speak, must come to grips with the need to be more than "a reflection" of the world.

It is this which Lenin grasped when he viewed the outbreak of World War I and the collapse of the Second International. It led him to an entirely new concept of PRAXIS, practice IN THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE ("in the theory of knowledge" was underlined by Lenin as he read Hegel [in 1914] and made this crucial generalization: "Cognition not only reflects the objective world, but creates it"). The truth that we are trying to express for THIS period, for OUR ERA, is this: Freedom can be achieved ONLY IF men understand their experience and WILL to transform reality....

'LOWER AND DEEPER'

All of philosophy consists in making explicit what is only implicit in the objective movement of history. An OBJECTIVE view of historical development of necessity reveals the subjective, the human force which will be the one to REALIZE the forward movement of humanity. In the case of the United States it was the Negro.

Such a methodology guided Marx's actions. Instead of despairing when the British trade unionists left the First International at the time of the Paris Commune, Marx further concretized his concept of the revolutionary role of the proletariat with the new view of going "lower and deeper" into the class – the unskilled rather than the skilled; the newly-arrived in the city rather than the bourgeoisified ones; the oppressed minorities – the Jews, the Irish, the East Indians – rather than upper rungs who gain from capitalist-imperialist exploitation.

It is not an easy concept to grasp. It wasn't when Marx first said it. It wasn't for nearly a half-century thereafter. IT TOOK WORLD WAR I AND THE COLLAPSE OF ESTABLISHED MARXISM IN THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL BEFORE LENIN "FOUND" AND FULLY UNDERSTOOD THAT EXPRESSION, "LOWER AND DEEPER," AND THEN ONLY WITH THE HELP OF THE HEGELIAN DIALECTIC AND ITS CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT THROUGH CONTRADICTION, VIA THE ROUTE OF THE UNITY OF OPPOSITES, OF SELF-DEVELOPMENT.

Once Lenin understood it, then and only then did he fully understand the empiric facts. Then and only then could Lenin build on that foundation the theory of the aristocracy of labor as being integral to monopoly capitalism. This on the one hand. On the other hand, came the driving

necessity to destroy the state structure, root and branch, and with the new form of organization, of the self-mobilized masses – the Soviets – have the party aim to end division between mental and manual labor.

No Vanguard Role is 'Fixed'

It is this, JUST THIS, that led Lenin to write: "Cognition not only reflects the world but creates it." The party, as the "knowing" of the proletariat, would prove itself BY aligning with these masses. It wasn't that the party "guided them"; it was THEY who pushed the party forward, and it is THEY who found a need for "this knowing." WHEN THE SEPARATION OF PARTY AND MASS, AND KNOWING AND ACTION RE-ENTERED THE SCENE WITH THE CONQUEST OF STATE POWER, THE PARTY AND THE REVOLUTION WERE BOTH DOOMED.

Let's go back to the vanguard role of the Negro. Vanguard is not yet the whole. The Negroes do need the collaboration of the white workers, and not only because the latter are the majority while the American Negroes are a minority, but mainly because the proletariat, too, is a vanguard and at the very point around which all else in society revolves – at the point of production. NO VANGUARD ROLE IS EVER "FIXED FOR ALL TIME." Only with the vanguard party's transformation into opposite – the monolithic party of Stalin, Khrushchev, Mao – did such a concept arise. IT BECAME "FIXED" ALONG WITH TOTALITARIAN POWER.

This, precisely, is why with our very first unique theoretic contribution – analysis of Russia as state-capitalist totalitarianism – we insisted, at one and the same time, on the concept of NEW FORMS OF WORKERS' REVOLTS. And we pointed to the CLASS NATURE of Stalinism rather than only its bureaucratization as the root cause of monolithism in "the party."

This, precisely, is why, once we made explicit all that was implicit in the theory of state-capitalism and workers' revolt and returned to philosophy, we achieved the full circle – Marx's original Humanism rather than yet one other form of vanguardism.

Relationship of Philosophy and Practice

"Cognition not only reflects the world, but creates it." To work this out fully, from every vantage point, including those we cannot even see, is the task of this generation.

That the youth not only here, but throughout the world, and especially so in Japan, precisely in the country where you cannot possibly accuse the youth of inactivity, keep probing for the philosophic foundations discloses yet another distinction between our organization and the party in the old vanguardist sense.

It is this: when a fundamental fact of man's existence eludes him, when he cannot penetrate through the objective and yet does not wish to turn to external forces to explain it away – be they gods, fetishisms, or vanguard party – he digs deep down to find the meaning of his actions.

This is the pivotal significance of philosophy. It is neither a mythology, nor metaphysics, nor an illusion. As Herzen saw it over 100 years ago, "Dialectic is the algebra of revolution." And

Merleau-Ponty added 100 years later, "Philosophy is the algebra of history."

In a word, the search for philosophy, the attempts to work out this "algebra of HISTORY and of revolution" is the act of REALIZING it. The young Marx may have sounded idealistic when he said that it was not enough for theory to tend to reality; reality must also tend to theory. But he meant something very PRACTICAL: the proletariat taking hold of philosophy.

This is why I entitled this report "Transformation of Reality." This is not only the lifeblood of theory, of methodology, of the dialectic, it is life itself.

It is the life of the proletarian rebelling against his conditions of labor and life and overthrowing these CONDITIONS which degrade him.

It is the life of the youth rebelling against a world they did not make but are willing to reconstruct on new beginnings.

It is the life of the minorities, and in America this minority is the Negro, but it is every oppressed minority anywhere from the Jews to the American Indians, from the Germans or the Poles or Hungarians in the Russian Empire to the non-Han minorities in China.

And transformation of reality requires that we recognize our special role in all actions we undertake – be they in the Freedom NOW movement, or in the trade unions (both against the labor bureaucrats and those like the Trade Union Leadership Council who would compromise with them) or in youth organizations, or functioning on our own, be that the theoretical and/or practical fields. Let's see how these relate this very moment to the March on Washington as the culmination of all the Negro struggles since the Birmingham events in May. What has transformed it from a March on Washington for "Jobs and Freedom," to one for "redress of grievances"?

First came a pause in the USSR-USA Cold War (whether you wish to consider it from the point of view of realigning their different orbits, or, more important, the intensifying of the class struggle at home). Our resolution centered around it, warned of the dangers of the Negro leadership stopping far short of the full aspirations of the Negro masses, criticized white labor for its passivity in this, AND we at once went to press with a second edition of American Civilization on Trial where this is also spelled out by asking people to join News and Letters Committees to continue in the full tradition of Abolitionism and Marxist-Humanism....

Just as a foundation, even a solid one, is not yet the whole house, so a comprehensive theory which we alone have in Marxist-Humanism is not yet the organization, the PEOPLE who alone can put it into effect, while the process of so doing will act toward their own self-development.

The uniqueness of Marxist-Humanism lies also in this: that despite all theoretic contributions and singleness of purpose in achieving total freedom, it asks to be "taken over" by the masses, to be subjected to the daily and long-range tests, so long only as the UNITY of theory and practice, worker and intellectual, technologically backward and technologically advanced economies, all merge in order never to stop short of "the ultimate": the new society, the new human dimension, the incorporation within the individual of all of his mental and manual talents....

It is now up to us AS AN ORGANIZATION, which neither lays claim to "vanguardism," nor has illusions of substituting itself for the mass, to see that our uniqueness is made known, our

isolation ended, our coalescence with the mass movement a fact which will help in the creation of a truly new society on truly new beginnings. That is why I wish to end on the note sounded in our Resolution:

ORGANIZATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS BEGINS WITH THE REALIZATION THAT NONE OF THESE ANALYSES, WHETHER IN BOOK OR PAMPHLET FORMS, IN NEWSPAPER, OR POLITICAL LETTER FORMS, ARE "FOR THEMSELVES." IT IS CONCEIT TO THINK SO. NO ONE CAN BUILD AN ORGANIZATION WHEN THEY UNDERESTIMATE THE REASON OF THE MASSES TO GRASP OUR PHILOSOPHY ORGANIZATIONALLY.

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