

# 50 years after the revolution – Mao, Hegel, and dialectics in China

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**Source:** The Writings of Raya Dunayevskaya: Marxist-Humanist Archives November 1999;

**Proofed:** and corrected by Chris Clayton 2006;

**Editor's note:** The 50th anniversary of the foundations of the People's Republic of China is the occasion of our publishing the following 1957 letter to a comrade by Raya Dunayevskaya on the significance of Mao Zedong and his Feb. 27, 1957 speech "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People." Written from the vantage point of the dialectical categories of Hegel's PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND, this early philosophic critique of Mao would later be developed by Dunayevskaya in her works, MARXISM AND FREEDOM and PHILOSOPHY AND REVOLUTION. (See below for these and other writings on Mao and China by Dunayevskaya.) The original letter can be found in THE RAYA DUNAYEVSKAYA COLLECTION, 12179-12181. The footnotes have been supplied by the editor.

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June 23, 1957

Dear Olga:

As I was reading Mao's "revelations" on how contradictions continue to exist under "the people's republic" with even "people" redefined, I remembered Leontiev with his admission that value still operated in Russia, with even "Chapter I" of CAPITAL redefined as something of the "past." <sup>[1]</sup> But while it is true that Mao does with the philosophical concept of contradiction the same thing that Leontiev did with the economic concept of value – somewhere in a footnote in Volume I Marx laughs at the bourgeois philosopher for understanding every sort of senseless contradiction but being a stranger to the Hegelian contradiction which is the source of all dialectic – this is 1957, not 1943, and it is China, not Russia. <sup>[2]</sup> What is new in the date and the country is what we have to grapple with. In 1943 Russia was about to win a war and was telling its workers there will be no difference in their conditions of labor. In 1957 the whole world, even the dominant rulers who are aiming for war if that is what is needed for world mastery, are scared senseless that they might all be blown off the earth. In a way it bears a parallel to the rise of Nazism when the depression so shook up the world and the workers were in such violent revolt that even fascism had to call itself National SOCIALISM.

Moreover state capitalism in an industrial country is one thing and something else again in so vast an underdeveloped country as China – Mao says five million of its six million population is peasant! They must still talk about their bowl of rice and ask the bourgeois intellectual's collaboration, something like some of the Czarist officers who were given a place under political leadership of the CP [Communist Party] in Russia in those bitter communist war years.

Philosophically it is a very great advance indeed for a Mao to put contradiction, even though he makes it meaningless by his application to all so it applies to none, in the center of his speech. Grace Lee Boggs didn't go beyond that in her philosophic section – neither in "Dialectics and the Fate of Humanity" in 1947 when revolution was in the air, nor in 1950 when Hegel got put into our thesis only to have him equivalent to development through contradiction while the age of absolutes remained an abstraction. <sup>[3]</sup>

[T]he new article in the Russian journal of philosophy suddenly took issue with Hegel and claimed Marx considered the unity of opposites as "greater than negativity," denying the Hegelian negation of the negation as central to Marx.<sup>[4]</sup> I said then, wasn't it peculiar that they all bandy about unity of opposites so freely just in order to evade the resolution of the contradiction and face the Absolute Idea. Mao now says Lenin said some marvelous things on contradictions. It only goes to prove that what was central for Lenin in 1915 is not for us for today, except as methodology.<sup>[5]</sup> Nothing, absolutely nothing short of Absolute Idea are the Communists afraid of any more. How we have them beat now!

If you will bear with me, we will, before we reach Mao and the special place Hegel assigned to him in the Spirit in Self-Estrangement, go through the previous stages of alienation:<sup>[6]</sup>

1. In SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, the Unhappy Consciousness or Alienated Soul arises as "a personality confined within its narrow self and its petty activity, a personality brooding over itself, as unfortunate as it is pitifully destitute." <sup>[7]</sup> Hegel continues on the very next page, "Through these moments – the negative abandonment first of its own right and power of decision, then of its property and enjoyment, and finally the positive moment of carrying on what it does not understand – it deprives itself, completely and in truth, of the consciousness of inner and outer freedom, or reality in the sense of its own existence for itself."<sup>[8]</sup> I have brought this down in a footnote in the book to a description of the ex-radicals who can find no place for themselves either in or outside of the bourgeois fold and end up on the green couch.<sup>[9]</sup> You can put in characters you yourself know and get your own illumination.
2. In REASON alienation takes the form of "The Law of the Heart and the Frenzy of Self-Conceit": "The heart-throb for the welfare of mankind passes therefore into the rage of frantic self-conceit, into the fury of consciousness to preserve itself from destruction; and to do so by casting out of its life the perversion which it really is, and by straining to regard and to express that perversion as something else." <sup>[10]</sup> If not [C.L.R. James] then any fainthearted Marxist or labor bureaucrat will do, including Khrushchev.
3. But Mao doesn't appear till "Spirit in Self-Estrangement – the Discipline of Culture" which "constructs not merely one world, but a twofold world, divided and self-opposed." <sup>[11]</sup> And just look how Hegel follows Mao through with his discovery of contradiction so long as there is "unity": "The equilibrium of the whole is not the unity which abides by itself, nor its inwardly secured tranquillity, but rests on the estrangement of its opposite. The whole is, therefore, like each single moment, a self-estranged reality." <sup>[12]</sup> And two pages further on Hegel continues: "The sphere of spirits at this stage break up into two regions. The one is the actual world, that of self-estrangement, the other is that which spirit constructs for itself in the ether of pure consciousness, raising itself above the first. This second world, being constructed in opposition and contrast to that estrangement, is just on that account not free from it...." <sup>[13]</sup>

That is what Mao is blind to – he thinks he can construct two opposite worlds, and as soon as he assures it "100 flowers can bloom," even if he does deny any flower the right to be a second party, which is "bourgeois," thereupon he has assured his poverty-stricken land "unity." Marx, in

his "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic," where he speaks of how many fields of exploration lay hidden in Hegel if only critically understood, points precisely to this spot which Hegel calls "The Noble Type of Consciousness." [14] [A]t another place [Hegel says], "This type of mind is the heroism of service" and, finally "Such a type is the haughty vassal; he is active in the interests of the state-power": "This estrangement, however, takes place in Language, in words alone, and language assumes here its peculiar role.... [I]t is the power of utterance QUA utterance which, just in speaking, performs what has to be performed.... Speech, however, contains this ego in its purity; it alone expresses I, I itself." [15]

It is equivalent, in economic terms, to the Fetishism of Commodities which kept even classical political economy, which had discovered labor as the source of value, its prisoner. Throughout that remarkable first chapter in CAPITAL Marx keeps talking of the perverse relationship under capitalism where dead labor dominates living labor. In Hegel "this entire sphere of perversion" of the spirit in self-estrangement ends with: "This type of spiritual life is the absolute and universal inversion of reality and thought, their entire estrangement the one from the other; it is pure culture. What is found out in this sphere is that neither the concrete realities, state-power and wealth, nor their determinate conceptions, good and bad, nor the consciousness of good and bad (the consciousness that is noble and the consciousness that is base) possess real truth; it is found that all these moments are inverted and transmuted the one into the other, and each is the opposite of itself." [16]

THAT opposite Mao did not grasp, nor could he, since this state he is leader of has its own dialectic of development, irrespective of the noble consciousness of its leader. Just as every single thing has its own dialectic of development, so the various stages of alienation go through their transformations. Or rather vice versa since "the moving and creating principle" (to use Marx's expression for the principle of negativity) is this very negativity. Neither Khrushchev nor Mao can escape this, but that each has tried a different aspect of it because of the compulsion from the objective movement and the subjective aspirations of their working people denotes the true absolute of our age, the counterrevolution in the very innards of revolution and (and that is the vision) the revolution in the innards of their counterrevolutionary states. Wait till the book [MARXISM AND FREEDOM] appears and we go to battle.

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## NOTES

1. Dunayevskaya is referring to the Russian economist, L.A. Leontiev, editor of UNDER THE BANNER OF MARXISM, and the journal's 1943 article "Some Questions of Teaching Political Economy," translated from the Russian by Dunayevskaya. With the reversal on the law of value, Leontiev went on to propose beginning the teaching of Marx's CAPITAL by skipping Chapter 1 on Commodities. Her translation and rejoinder to the article can be found in THE RAYA DUNAYEVSKAYA COLLECTION, 192 and 209, respectively. Also see THE MARXIST-HUMANIST THEORY OF STATE-CAPITALISM, pp. 83-87.

2. Karl Marx, CAPITAL, Vol. 1, trans., Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 744.

3. This refers to the 1947 essay by C.L.R. James, "Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity," and the Johnson-Forest Tendency's 1950 thesis, STATE CAPITALISM AND WORLD REVOLUTION. Grace Lee Boggs wrote the final chapter of the latter.

4. The book Dunayevskaya is referring to is **MARXISM AND FREEDOM**, first published in 1958; the Russian journal article appeared in a 1955 issue of the Russian philosophy journal, **QUESTIONS OF PHILOSOPHY**. For Dunayevskaya's critique of the Russian attack on Hegel's concept of dialectical negativity, see **MARXISM AND FREEDOM**, pp. 39-40.

5. This refers to Lenin's World War I **PHILOSOPHIC NOTEBOOKS** on Hegel's **SCIENCE OF LOGIC**.

6. "Spirit in Self-Estrangement" and the following concepts that Dunayevskaya discusses are principal categories of Hegel's **PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND**.

7. G.W.F. Hegel, **PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND**, trans., J.B. Baillie (London: Allen & Unwin, 1931), p. 264.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 265-66.

9. See **MARXISM AND FREEDOM**, p. 347-48, note 11.

10. Hegel, **PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND**, p. 397.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 510.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 511.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 513.

14. In the "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic" in his **ECONOMIC-PHILOSOPHIC MANUSCRIPTS** of 1844, Marx wrote that "The **PHENOMENOLOGY** is, therefore, the hidden, still unclear even to itself, and mystifying critical philosophy. However, to the extent that it holds fast the alienation of Man – even if Man appears only in the form of Spirit – to that extent **ALL** elements of criticism lie hidden in it and are often already **PREPARED** and **WORKED OUT** in a manner extending far beyond the Hegelian standpoint. The sections on 'Unhappy Consciousness,' the 'Honorable Consciousness,' the fight of the noble and downtrodden consciousness, etc., etc., contain the critical elements – although still in an alienated form – of whole spheres like Religion, the State, Civic Life, etc." This is quoted from Dunayevskaya's translation which appeared as an appendix to the original 1958 edition of her **MARXISM AND FREEDOM**, p. 309.

15. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, pp. 527, 528, 529-530.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 541.

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## **Selected Writings of Raya Dunayevskaya on Mao & China**

In 1975, while Mao was still alive and a new Constitution was being proposed, Raya Dunayevskaya posed the question of "Maoism Without Mao." Nearly 40 years since the first publication of **MARXISM AND FREEDOM**, a wealth of research and analysis has been available to **NEWS & LETTERS** readers. To understand the meaning of Mao, 50 years after the Chinese Communist Party came to power, we call your attention to:

**MARXISM AND FREEDOM**: Chapter 17, "The Challenge of Mao Tse-tung" (1964) and Chapter 18 on "Cultural Revolution or Maoist Reaction" (1971) (Chapter 17 available in Chinese.)

**PHILOSOPHY AND REVOLUTION**: Chapter 5 on "The Thought of Mao Tse-tung," including an analysis of the Beijing-Jakarta axis.

**NEWS ESSAYS** (1977): Essay on "Post-Mao China: What Now?"

**SEXISM, POLITICS AND REVOLUTION** (1977): Includes both "Chiang Ch'ing, Hua Kuo-feng in post-Mao China" and "Alienation and Revolution," an interview with a Hong Kong refugee as the Cultural Revolution erupted.

**MAO'S CHINA AND THE 'PROLETARIAN CULTURAL REVOLUTION'**," written for **NEW POLITICS**, Spring 1968, and as chapter in **THE REVOLUTION IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE REVOLUTION**.

POLITICAL-PHILOSOPHIC LETTERS: Includes "Mao's Last Hurrah" (Feb. 27, 1976) and "Post-Mao China: What is Mao's Legacy?" (Nov. 17, 1976).

All writings are available from News & Letters, 59 E. Van Buren, Rm. 707, Chicago, IL 60605.

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### **Dunayevskaya Archive**