

The 1956 Hungarian Revolution with Eyes of Today

Peter Hudis

December 1, 2006

Too soon
The brace of conquest circumscribed our being
Yet found us rooted in that unyielding
Will to life bequeathed from birth, we
Sought no transferred deed of earthly holdings.
Slaves do not possess their kind. Nor do
The truly free. –Woye Soyinka

The lack of projection of an alternative to capitalism is taking a terrible toll on the radical movement. It is seen in the way many leftists are tailending or supporting reactionary tendencies because they presumably “oppose U.S. imperialism.” It happened in the 1990s, when many failed to support the Bosnian and Kosovar struggles for self-determination on the grounds that Serbia’s Milosevic opposed aspects of U.S. foreign policy. It is happening today, when many argue that Hezbollah, Iran, or the Islamic fundamentalists in the Iraqi “resistance” shouldn’t be condemned because they claim to be a bulwark against U.S. or Israeli domination. Such positions flow from a failure to develop a viable concept of a post-capitalist society that can ground radical theory and practice. In the absence of a thought-out alternative to capitalist value production, “radical” politics falls back on supporting the lesser evil or proclaiming a “plague on both your houses.” Neither points beyond today’s crises.

The Hungarian Revolution of 1956, which occurred 50 years ago this fall, contains important lessons for what can be done to overcome today’s crisis in developing an alternative to capitalism.

A MOVEMENT FROM PRACTICE

The revolution that broke out in Hungary in 1956 against the Russian-installed regime was more than a new stage of revolt. It initiated a new EPOCH in representing an effort by masses of people to become free from the despotic plan of capital even when faced with the power of a totalitarian state-capitalist regime.

The revolution began in response to an attack by Budapest police on a student rally of Oct. 23, 1956 calling for democracy. Within days a reform government led by Imre Nagy came to power in support of the students and thousands of workers who rallied to their cause. Workers' councils sprang up around the country as workers moved to take control of the factories.

Alarmed by these events, the Russian army invaded on Nov. 4. Despite killing thousands, it failed to crush the revolt. Though Nagy and many of his ministers were arrested (Nagy was later executed by the Russians), the workers' councils re-grouped and called a general strike. It lasted for five weeks, during which time production relations passed into the hands of Hungary's workers. It marked the first time in history that a general strike was successfully carried out AFTER a military invasion. It was not until Dec. 19 that the Russians crushed the revolution.

The attempt by the workers' councils to run society was not led by any political party. The councils served as the political and economic vanguard in controlling production. The councils weren't restricted to one industry but were found in almost every branch of national activity. Nor was this a mere nationalist revolt; the revolution started in support of strikes in Poland, and the workers convinced several garrisons of Russian troops to mutiny and join their ranks.

Raya Dunayevskaya wrote of Hungary 1956: "The attempts of the workers to seize oil fields, rail centers, steel factories, and means of communication and to run these by revolutionary committees—that is to say, workers' control of production—is the true sign of the attempts of the revolution to affect a total change."(1)

Hungary 1956 was therefore on a much higher level than simply establishing a network of workers' cooperatives. It was also on a higher level than Solidarnosc in Poland in 1980. What placed Hungary 1956 on such a high level is that it was a SOCIAL REVOLUTION in which the working class seized control of production relations on a NATIONAL scale. It was the only social revolution to occur in Europe since 1917.

One sign of the crisis afflicting radical thought today is that many seem to have forgotten the difference between a new stage of revolt and a SOCIAL REVOLUTION that seizes control of production relations. Such a momentous event doesn't only produce an outburst of activity. It also unleashes crucial IDEAS.

What IDEAS were unleashed by 1956? First, in moving to take control of production the Hungarian workers showed a passion to be free from statist Communism AND western capitalism. Second, the depth of this quest for freedom was expressed in the central role played by groups of leftist intellectuals, such as the Petofi circle, which defended the humanism of Marx against Stalinist distortions. Prior to 1956 the humanism of Marx was either unknown or restricted to discussions among relatively isolated intellectuals. Hungary 1956 changed that. The revolutions pried from the archives Marx's humanist writings, his ECONOMIC AND PHILOSOPHIC MANUSCRIPTS OF 1844.

In this sense Hungary 1956 represented not just a new stage of revolt but A NEW STAGE OF COGNITION.

JAMES' RESPONSE TO HUNGARY 1956

The Hungarian Revolution had a global impact, as seen in the thousands of Communists worldwide who tore up their party cards to protest the Stalinist destruction of a genuine workers' revolution. Hungary 1956 also had an important impact on anti-Stalinist theoreticians who had viewed Russia and China as state-capitalist. Since their response to 1956 speaks directly to the task of developing a viable alternative to capitalism today, I will focus on that here.

A major figure in the anti-Stalinist Left at the time was the Caribbean-born Marxist C.L.R. James. In his 1958 book *FACING REALITY*, he held that the spontaneous emergence of the workers' councils in the Hungarian Revolution was the beacon for a new type of revolution that will dispense with centralized political leadership and the separation between the revolutionary process and the ultimate goal. He wrote, "Previous revolutions have concentrated on the seizure of political power and only afterward on the problems of organizing production....The Hungarian Revolution reversed the process....The revolution from the very beginning seized power in the process of production and from there organized the political power."(2)

James argued that Hungary 1956 posed "no divorce between immediate objectives and ultimate aims." The AIM of socialism—the elimination of the separation of the activity of the laborer from the objective conditions of production—was being made real through the

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

process of revolution. On this basis he correctly held that the self-activity of the Hungarian workers pointed the way to a new kind of revolution that renders the Leninist concept of the “vanguard party” obsolete.

However, neither in *FACING REALITY* nor later did James mention that 1956 pried Marx’s humanist *ESSAYS* from the archives. While he singled out the *PRACTICAL* accomplishments of the revolution, he did not single out the *IDEAS* that flowed from it—the quest to bring to life the lost philosophical heritage of Marx’s humanism.

It isn’t that James *IGNORED* philosophy. Chapter 4 of *FACING REALITY*, entitled “The End of a Philosophy,” stated: “As an actual liberating philosophy of life, rationalism is dead. It is rationalism which no longer commands the allegiance of men” (p. 72). He argued: “From Plato to Hegel, European philosophers were always struggling to make a total harmonious unity of societies riddled by class struggles... But the time for that is past” (p. 69). He concluded that philosophy “as such” had come to an end.

WHY did James fail to see that Hungary 1956 signaled *A NEW STAGE OF COGNITION* that called for a *REBIRTH* of philosophy, instead of its demise? It wasn’t that he failed to grasp the spontaneous forms of organization that arise from mass revolt. As I see it, it was because of his peculiar understanding of the relation between “philosophy” and mass revolt that he had formulated as early as 1948 in his book *NOTES ON DIALECTIC*.

NOTES ON DIALECTIC sought to explore Hegel’s work as part of an effort to illuminate new kinds of revolts that James held were bound to emerge against state-capitalism. Its stated aim was to explore the most “abstract” part of Hegel’s *SCIENCE OF LOGIC*, the chapter on “The Absolute Idea,” to philosophically elucidate the significance of self-movement and self-activity.

However, James rushed to a conclusion about the relation of philosophy and mass action before even reaching “The Absolute Idea.” In commenting on the “Doctrine of Essence,” he wrote: “Organization as we have known it is at an end. The task is to abolish organization. The task is to teach, to illustrate, to develop spontaneity.”(3) Despite his ambitious effort to “re-read” Hegel, James reached a political conclusion about the relevance of certain dialectical categories before grappling with the *WHOLE* of Hegel’s thought.

In its rush to *APPLY* Hegelian categories, James’ *NOTES ON DIALECTIC* made spontaneous *FORMS* of organization into an absolute. For Lenin the right form of

organization was the vanguard party; for James the right form of organization became the decentralized, spontaneous form of organization. Despite James' criticisms of Lenin, they both shared a common assumption—that the FORM of organization exhausts the CONCEPT of organization.

It is therefore no accident that James never returned to a sustained discussion of Hegel after 1948. Why turn anew to philosophy, when he now had the answer to what he had been looking for—namely, that Hegel's "abstract" concept of self-movement is "translated" for our day as proletarian self-activity? James simply concluded from his study that once proletarian self-activity comes to the fore, the need for philosophy "as such" comes to an end.

In sum, by reducing philosophy to the reflection of the steps taken by mass struggles, James negated the need for a philosophy that can help develop a liberating vision of the future. That is why he later steered clear of both Hegel's dialectic and Marx's Humanism.

This is evident from *FACING REALITY*, which states: "The day-to-day struggles of the workers constitute the socialist society and the basic struggle for socialism" (p. 117). He held that "the socialist society exists...we [merely] have to record the facts of its existence" (p. 110). Philosophy, he held, is not needed to grapple with the question of "what happens after the revolution," since the answer is provided by spontaneous mass activity. And since he held that there is no independent need for philosophy, he concluded that there was no need for an independent organization of Marxist theoreticians to develop one as part of an effort to give spontaneous action its direction.

DUNAYEVSKAYA'S RESPONSE TO 1956

In direct contrast to James' approach was the position taken by his former co-leader in the Johnson-Forest Tendency, Raya Dunayevskaya, who founded the philosophy of Marxist-Humanism in the period in which James wrote *FACING REALITY*.

Dunayevskaya emphasized the key role of the Hungarian workers in seizing control of production relations during the 1956 revolution, thereby showing that a new society could be created without the mediation of a vanguard party or a transitional society to socialism. She repeatedly returned to the importance of Hungary 1956, as in disputing Jean-Paul Sartre's contention that the workers' councils "were much too brief and too troubled for us to be able to speak of an organized democracy."(4)

Dunayevskaya held that 1956 made dialectical philosophy not less but MORE important, because *THE MOVEMENT FROM PRACTICE IS ITSELF A FORM OF THEORY*. In

prying Marx's humanist philosophic writings from the archives, the Hungarian revolutionaries demonstrated a passion for IDEAS to carry their movement forward. They did not presume that workers' councils shorn of new cognition was sufficient for answering the question of what constitutes a post-capitalist society. They were reaching out to revolutionary theoreticians to respond to their activity by providing as comprehensive a CONCEPTUAL response to the question of "what happens after the revolution" as was found in their own practice.

Surely, "rationalist" cognition shorn of any connection to spontaneous mass revolt is one-sided. But so is spontaneous revolt shorn of connection with dialectical cognition. Only in their dialogical unity is it possible to work out the tremendously difficult problem of envisioning an alternative to capitalism.

Shortly before 1956, in a series of letters on Hegel's Absolutes written in 1953, Dunayevskaya spoke to this: "The new society will not be until it is; now we see only intimations, approximations..."(5) Spontaneous forms of organization contain important INTIMATIONS of a socialist society. Yet she held that such intimations of a new society that emerge from revolts against the "absolute general law of capitalist accumulation" are still "defective" in that they unfold within the confines of capitalist value production. To make the idea of a new society explicit, we must go further—to what Hegel called "the free release of the Idea," the PHILOSOPHIC elaboration of freedom itself.

Dunayevskaya didn't rush to a quick political conclusion in her exploration of Hegel's Absolutes—unlike James, who reduced dialectics to the reflection of the steps taken by mass practice. In carefully tracing out the dialectic in thought, she discerned within Hegel's concept of "absolute negativity" the expression of the VISION OF A NEW SOCIETY, which Marx had worked out for his day as "revolution in permanence."

The problem we face today is that anti-vanguardist theoreticians who do grasp the importance of mass self-activity tend to burden spontaneous revolts with what is THEIR responsibility—working out a liberating vision of the future. This has led to an impasse in the radical movement. We will surmount this impasse neither by turning away from "rationalist cognition" in the name of spontaneity and "everyday resistance" nor by upholding it in the name of class consciousness and "self-awareness" that fails to address what happens after a revolution. What is needed is for the humanism of Marx that was brought onto the historic stage 50 years ago to be redeveloped for today on the basis of the new stage of cognition called Marxist-Humanism.

This poses THE challenge to organization. While spontaneous forms of organization remain key, there is a need for organizations of Marxist theoreticians that exist independently of them to work out the question masses of people around the world are asking—is there an alternative to capitalism and the failures of what called itself “socialism” over the past 100 years?

* * *

1. MARXISM AND FREEDOM by Raya Dunayevskaya (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), p. 255.
2. FACING REALITY, by C.L.R. James, Grace C. Lee, with the collaboration of Cornelius Castoriadis (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2006), p. 12. All page references are to this edition.
3. NOTES ON DIALECTICS: HEGEL, MARX, LENIN, by C.L.R. James (Westport, CT: Lawrence & Hill, 1980), p. 117.
4. See PHILOSOPHY AND REVOLUTION, from Hegel to Sartre and from Marx to Mao (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), p. 198.
5. “Letters on Hegel’s Absolutes,” in THE POWER OF NEGATIVITY: Selected Writings on the Dialectic in Hegel and Marx, by Raya Dunayevskaya, ed. by Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), p. 10.

Originally appeared in News & Letters, December 2006-January 2007