

The Contemporary Relevance of the Ideas of Raya Dunayevskaya

By Peter Hudis, co-editor of the *Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, Loyola University

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Any effort to deal with social change today has to deal with the elephant standing in the room—the disastrous legacy of “socialist” regimes of the twentieth century. It is clear that neither the Social-Democratic welfare state nor the “Communist” single party states advanced the cause of human liberation. Instead, their dismal failures has discredited the idea of socialism and given capitalism a new lease on life—which capitalism surely doesn’t deserve, given the horrendous economic, social, and ecological destruction it is producing daily in the twenty-first century. In light of this, any effort to renew a radical critique of capitalist society today can only succeed if it makes the sharpest possible break from the assumptions, approach and policies that guided the disastrous “socialist” regimes of the past 100 years.

Here is where the legacy of Raya Dunayevskaya takes on special importance. She not only sharply critiqued capitalism in its traditional free market forms but was also a virulent critic of the regimes that claimed to rule in Marx’s name. This was seen from as early as 1941, when she critiqued the USSR as “state-capitalist”—based on an exhaustive analysis of the Russian economy—at a time when it certainly wasn’t easy to do so. In the early and middle 1940s, when she fleshed out her theory of state-capitalism in great detail, the USSR was ally of U.S. in battling Nazism in World War II and the vast bulk of Western intellectuals—including those not directly associated with Stalinism—tail-ended or apologized for the USSR in some way, shape, or form. Moreover, she analyzed Stalinism not as a mere *political* phenomenon (as did the Trotskyists from whom she broke) but as the expression of a new *world* stage of capitalism that had emerged from out of the Great Depression—*totalitarian state-capitalism*.

Dunayevskaya argued from the 1940s onward that radicals must break from *both* poles of world capitalism, as expressed in Western “free market” capitalism and the “Communist” statist economies. This theory of state-capitalism also led her to break from anti-Stalinists like Leon Trotsky, who despite his opposition to Stalinism on political grounds continued to defend until the end of his life the USSR as a more progressive social phenomenon than that of Western capitalism. She further developed her theory of state-capitalism in the late 1950s and 1960s, when she issued a sharp critique of Maoist China as state-capitalist. This was at a moment when much of the New Left in the U.S. as well as in the developing world was much enamored with Mao—even though Mao’s Great Leap Forward, as we now know from detailed analyses, led to a least 30 million needless deaths from starvation and overwork in 1960-61. At least a million more perished during the Cultural Revolution—which the bulk of Western intellectual and leftists blindly proclaimed represented a genuine process of liberation! This critical independence carried through into Dunayevskaya’s work of the late 1960s and 1970s. Although she was a fierce critic of Western imperialism and supported the National

Liberation Movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, she sharply critiqued Castro's regime for embracing the state-capitalist model of USSR, from as early as 1961.

Throughout her life was a fiercely independent thinker who refused to accept the twisted logic that opposition to US capitalism-imperialism means turning a blind eye to the horrors of various state-capitalist regimes that may oppose it. We have a lot to learn from that for today, when parts of the Left are repeating the errors of the past by saying that we cannot openly condemn Iran's clerical dictatorship or such tendencies as Hamas and Hezbollah since they (claim at least) to oppose US domination.

The most significant aspect of Dunayevskaya's theory of state-capitalism, however, was that it was not just a negative critique of repressive regimes but that also led her to discover dimensions of Marx's work overlooked by even his closest followers. In course of her work on state-capitalism in USSR in the early 1940s she came across Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (then almost unknown in the English-speaking world) and was the first to translate parts of it into English, in 1941. Parts of the *1844 Manuscripts* served as the appendix to the first edition of her *Marxism and Freedom*, in 1958. She especially emphasized the contemporary importance of the way in the *1844 Manuscripts* attacked capitalism *and* crude communism and Marx called his distinctive philosophy a new humanism that combines both idealism and materialism.

The *humanism* of Marx, she held in *Marxism and Freedom* as well as in her later works, pervades all of his writings—not just the *1844 Manuscripts* but *Capital* most of all. Herbert Marcuse was so impressed with her ability to discern the dialectic *and* *humanist* components of *Capital* and he wrote the Preface to *Marxism and Freedom*, even though they differed on a number of political and philosophical issues. *Capital's* real object of critique, Dunayevskaya showed through a detailed analysis, was not the existence of private property or the market but rather the domination of dead over living labor, the transformation of human relations into relations between things.

As she developed the philosophy of Marxist-Humanism from 1950s to the 1980s following the birth of state-capitalist theory (which she continued to develop as a *component part of Marxist-Humanism* for the rest of her life), she argued that Marx developed a far deeper vision of liberation than was grasped by even his closest followers—beginning with Engels. Post-Marx Marxism, she held, was a pejorative—even when it came to such important revolutionaries as Lenin, Trotsky and those who followed them. As she argued in *Philosophy and Revolution*, Marx's transformed Hegel's revolution in philosophy into a philosophy of revolution that aims to uproot all relations in which human relations take on the form of things. And as she argued in *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's philosophy of Revolution*, Marx's Marxism is not just a theory of class struggle, let alone objective laws of historical development, but is rather a philosophy of “revolution in permanence.”

Dunayevskaya's work shows that it is not possible to fully appreciate the depth of Marx's critique of society without grasping the limitations of regimes and movements

that claimed his mantle. Her contribution lies in critiquing the wrong path taken by socialism in twentieth century in such a way as to find a way back to Marx's humanism. This speaks directly to us today. The path back to Marx's Marxism, as we try to work out a viable opposition to capitalism for the twenty-first century, cannot be through such post-Marx Marxists as Lenin, and it cannot be through Engels. The path to grasping the depth of Marx's ideas is provided by the philosophic insights of Marxist-Humanism in the second half of the twentieth century, when the most bloody—and tragic—century in the history of humanity led to the deep thinking and rethinking that led to a veritable *new beginning in philosophy itself*.

Where does this all leave us for today? First, we are the first generation that has the possibility of grasping the depth of Marx's body of ideas, since it is only now that all of his voluminous writings are in print, in the new edition of the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*. Second, we are the first generation that can grasp the grasp depth of Marx's body of ideas because of the illumination provided by the Marxist-Humanist effort to recapture Marx's humanism from over a century of distortion. *Critical in this remains the work of rediscovery that is still before us—the task of critically engaging and developing anew the conception of the alternative to capitalism in all its forms that is suggested by Marx's new continent of thought and of revolution*. It is to this rediscovery that the International Marxist-Humanist Organization is most of all devoted.

This task does not mean genuflecting before Marx, let alone Dunayevskaya. Both abhorred idol worship! Rather, the task is to encounter Dunayevskaya's way of rethinking Marx's work for her time as an invitation to critically rethink the meaning of Marx's ideas for ours. Doing so requires not paying homage to Dunayevskaya as a personality or treating her ideas as a bunch of religious texts, but rather by comprehending her specific discoveries that can enable us to work out a new, creative Marxism for our times.

Grasping an original discovery is hard, but it's well worth the effort. As Michael Polanyi—no Marxist himself—once said of creative scientists and philosophers: “They are sustained and guided by their heuristic passion. We call their work creative because it changes the world as we see it, by deepening our understanding of it. The change is irrevocable. A problem that I have once solved can no longer puzzle me; I cannot guess what I already know. Having made a discovery, I shall never see the world again as before. My eyes have become different; I have made myself into a person seeing and thinking differently. I have crossed a gap, the heuristic gap which lies between problem and discovery...Major discoveries change our interpretative framework. We have to cross the logical gap between a problem and its solution by relying on the unspecifiable impulse of our heuristic passion, and must undergo as we do a change of our intellectual personality.” (*Personal Knowledge*, p. 143).

We surely hope that others here will join us in the effort to critically engage Dunayevskaya's ideas, so that we too can possess the “interpretative framework” needed to creatively rethink Marx's ideas for the twenty-first century.