

Review Essay: Michael Löwy's 'The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx'

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PART 1. REVOLUTION: POLITICAL AND/OR SOCIAL?

This study of the *development of Marx's theory of revolution*--using Marxism as its method--focuses on the formative years of 1842-1848. Although I will raise some criticisms concerning the treatment of dialectics, it is unusual and especially valuable in drawing connections between Marx's theoretical concepts and his deepening involvement in this early, ideologically vibrant period of European working class activity.

Michael Löwy successfully shows how Marx's distinctive theory of revolution--the self-emancipation of the working class -- crystallized, *at least in part*, out of his actual interactions with workers and their organizations in conjunction with his profound critique of Hegel's philosophy and of other Young Hegelians.(1)

Löwy's *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx* (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands, 2003) was originally published in French in 1970. It has only recently been translated into English (by an unnamed translator) as part of the Historical Materialism Book Series sponsored by the London-based quarterly of that name. This publication is timely in light of the growing, international movement that urgently seeks an alternative to capitalism. At least some in that movement have put revolution back on the agenda after decades in which it was scornfully dismissed as poppycock. Löwy makes it abundantly clear that the kind of revolution *Marx came to conceptualize is a social revolution*, which goes far deeper than a political grab for power.

Michael Löwy is a well-known sociologist in France. He was born in Brazil and his work is widely discussed in Latin America as well. He was a student of Lucien Goldmann who himself was influenced by Georg Lukács. He has written on an unusually wide variety of cultural/political topics.

This book is a well-constructed, lucid, readable, largely chronological account of the events, persons and ideas in Marx's milieu, and how they affected the course of his thought. The author follows several distinct themes in the development of Marx's thought while, in the spirit of totality, delineating their interconnections with each other and with his ripening theory of revolution. In the process, Löwy introduces us to writings by the young Marx that are, sadly, rarely cited.

Löwy views Marx's actual meetings with workers, starting in late 1843 when he arrived in Paris, and his increasing involvement with revolutionary socialist associations, as major formative experiences in his theoretical/political evolution. Löwy's monograph fills in the gap between

strictly biographical studies of Marx, which give little attention to his thought, and, conversely, studies that treat his intellectual/political growth apart from the workers' movements of that day.

Marx was caught up in the swirl of intellectual and political currents that were bred by the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and Hegel's philosophical revolution. From these seemingly disparate elements, Marx, in the remarkably short space of a few years, was able to develop what Raya Dunayevskaya called "a new continent of thought" (*Philosophy and Revolution*, Lexington Books, Third Edition, 1989, p. 53).

Löwy considers Marx's political activities "not a biographical detail but the necessary complement of his writing, since both the one and the other had the same purpose, namely, not just to interpret the world but to change it, and to interpret it *in order* to change it." (p. 12) This theme of praxis is central to both Marx's thinking and Löwy's book. Biography, when considered in this light, becomes more than an historical adjunct but is rather a necessary component for comprehending the genesis of theory.

Full Human Emancipation

Löwy convincingly documents Marx's sharp distinction between the realms of the political, on the one hand, and of civil society, on the other, in modern capitalist society. Marx posited the primacy of civil society in initiating revolutionary change.

Marx first articulated the cleavage between civil society and the state in his 1843 "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law." According to Marx, Hegel saw the state as the pinnacle and unifier of society--the unity of the particular and universal. For Marx however civil society was the arena for battle between particular interests, and further, imparted "dynamism" to all parts of society, including the state. Hegel's conception of the state represented an ideal, but *alien, universality*. Marx argued that capitalist civil society is an undergirding for the modern state. The *political form of the state* therefore does not alter the essential character or "content of" its civil society. For example: "...the entire content of the law and the state, is the same in North America as in Prussia, with few modifications. The *republic* there is thus a mere state *form*, as is the monarchy here. The content of the state lies outside these constitutions ("Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, NY: International Publishers, 1975ff [hereafter CW], vol. 3, p. 31)." The *antithesis between the material content of civil society and its political constitution* was introduced in the bourgeois era that followed the French Revolution. For Marx it followed that: "The atomism into which civil society plunges in its *political act* follows necessarily from the fact that the community, the communal being in which the individual exists, is civil society separated from the state, or that the *political state* is an *abstraction* from it" ("Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," CW 3, p. 79). Thus the state is not organically linked with but is rather abstracted from the divisions within an already abstracted, divisive, competitive, bourgeois civil society. Marx argued throughout his life that fundamental societal change thus depended on change in the mode of production, the prime determinant of the social relations of civil society, rather than in power relations within the state.

Löwy shows that Marx's 1843 essay "On the Jewish Question" takes pains to distinguish the *limited political emancipation available to the citizen of the state from full human emancipation*. Civil society, as defined by the French Constitution's "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen," remained the sphere of egoism, of the *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Therefore the furthest the state can go in granting liberty is "the liberty of man viewed as an isolated monad." Marx concluded: "Political emancipation is the reduction of man, on the one hand, to a member of civil society, to an *egoistic, independent* individual, and, on the other hand, to a *citizen*, a juridical person. Only when the real, individual man re-absorbs in himself the abstract citizen, and as an individual human being has become a *species-being* in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only when man has recognized and organized his own powers as *social forces*, and consequently no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of *political* power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished" (CW 3, p. 168). By implication, radical individual/societal transformation will involve the re-connection of the isolated individual with her alienated social powers; this could be achieved only by a revolution which dissolves those powers in their abstract, juridical, alienated, political form.

True Human Community

At this point, Löwy brings to the fore another, rarely-cited essay written by Marx in early 1844, "Comments on James Mill, *Elemens d'économie politique*." In this critique of the classical political economists, Marx again contrasts the estranged community of individuals considered as atomized citizens of the state and as owners of private property, with real community. In the purchase and sale of private property: "The *social* connection or *social* relationship between the two property owners is therefore that of *reciprocity in alienation*, positing the relationship of alienation on both sides...it is the opposite of the *social* relationship" (CW 3, pp. 218, 219). Marx contrasted this alienated, detached relationship with a truer relationship, which involves *social* activity and *social* enjoyment. He argued: "Since *human nature* is the *true community* of men, by manifesting their *nature* men *create*, produce, the *human community*, the social entity, which is no abstract universal power opposed to the single individual, but is the essential nature of each individual, his own activity, his own life, his own spirit, his own wealth. Hence this *true community* ... is produced directly by their life activity itself...as long as man does not recognize himself as man, and therefore has not organized the world in a human way, this *community* appears in the form of *estrangement*, because its *subject*, man, is a being estranged from himself. Men, not as an abstraction, but as real, living, particular individuals, *are* this entity" (CW 3, p. 217). Marx is often misunderstood as valuing the collectivity over the individual person, of subordinating the individual to society. But here we see Marx's intense interest in the distinctive individual although that *individual is broadly conceived as "the social entity,"* not the estranged individual.

The Uprising of the Silesian Weavers: Of What Significance?

Löwy next examines the consequences for Marx's political thinking of his theoretical separation between the state and civil society: Marx voiced vigorous support for the 1844 revolt of the Silesian weavers. Marx's comments, called "Critical Marginal Notes on the Article 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform' by a Prussian" were published in August 1844, in the Paris

newspaper *Vorwärts*. Marx exposed the fact that the original article in that newspaper was written not by a Prussian, as claimed, but rather by Arnold Ruge, his co-editor of the newly founded *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbucher*.

For Löwy, the “Critical Notes” are not yet appreciated as “the point of departure for the intellectual journey that led to the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology*... in which his theory of the revolutionary self-emancipation of the proletariat took shape” (p. 91). On what basis did Löwy make that judgment?

Ruge viewed the uprising in Silesia as merely a local occurrence in politically backward Germany. In contrast, Marx argued that the revolt ushered in a new phase of revolt and class consciousness among European workers, led by workers from his homeland, Germany. The modern state is powerless, Marx wrote, to correct any debasement in the economic relations of civil society because the modern state is premised, as we have seen, on that very separation between public and private life. What is needed, Marx contended, is not so much political revolt as *social revolution* involving “the standpoint of the *whole* because it is a protest of man against dehumanized life.” “The state is based on the contradiction between *public* and *private life*, on the contradiction between *general interests* and *private interests*.... Indeed, confronted by the consequences which arise from the unsocial nature of this civil life, this private ownership, this trade, this industry, this mutual plundering of the various circles of citizens, confronted by all these consequences *impotence* is the *law of nature* of the [state] administration” (CW 3, p. 198). Marx’s very positive attitude toward the uprising of the Silesian weavers can serve as an example of Löwy’s methodological point that the significance and meaning of an objective event will be determined, in large part, by the theorist’s ideological “receptivity.”

The Consciousness of the Weavers

What of the thought of the weavers themselves? Ruge disparaged their social consciousness. He claimed that they could not see beyond their hearth, their district, or their factory. Hence, Ruge maintained, the whole question of poverty “has *so far still* been ignored by the all-penetrating *political soul*” (CW 3, p. 200). Marx retorted, “that *not one* of the French and English workers’ uprisings had such a *theoretical* and *conscious* character as the uprising of the Silesian weavers.... The Silesian uprising *begins* precisely with what the French and English workers’ uprisings *end*, with consciousness of the nature of the proletariat” (CW 3, p. 201). Marx concluded that the weavers’ revolt had implicitly announced its opposition to the society of private property. On what basis did Marx reach such a broad and far-reaching conclusion? The Silesian workers had destroyed not only the machines but also account books and titles to property. Their struggle had thus been directed not only against the visible enemy, the factory owner, but also against the hidden enemy, the banker, and *thus capital itself*.

Hence Marx proudly called the proletariat of his native Germany “the *theoretician* of the European proletariat.... A philosophical people can find its corresponding practice [Praxis] only in socialism, hence it is only in the *proletariat* that it can find the dynamic element of its emancipation” (CW3, p. 202). Löwy uses the term “*Praxis*” rather than “practice” in his translation. For Löwy, the decisive development in Marx’s theory of revolution was that socialism was no longer presented as pure theory, an idea “born in the philosopher’s mind,” a

“philosophical communism,” but rather as *praxis*. Löwy remarks: “In discovering in the proletariat the *active element* of emancipation, Marx, without saying a word about Feuerbach or philosophy, breaks with the schema to which he had still adhered” in his critiques of Hegel’s philosophy of the state. “By this practical stand taken on a revolutionary movement the path is opened to the *Theses on Feuerbach*” (p. 95).

What then is the role of the thinker in relation to such struggles? Marx chided the arrogance of the intellectual: “Confronted with the first outbreak of the Silesian workers’ uprising, the sole task of one who thinks and loves the truth consisted not in playing the role of *schoolmaster* in relation to this event but instead in studying its *specific* character”(CW 3, p. 202).

Marx discerned in the uprising of the Silesian workers the expression of a philosophical people; the self-awareness of the proletariat; and its bent toward socialism. By contrast, when the proletariat thinks in exclusively political terms, it “sees the cause of all evils in the *will*, and all means of remedy in *violence* and in the *overthrow* of a *particular* form of state” (CW 3, p. 204). Once again Marx differentiates between political revolution with its “narrow-minded spirit” and “the universal soul” of social revolution.

PART 2. LÖWY'S METHOD

Socio-Historical Settings

Löwy tells us that he will attempt a Marxist analysis of the origins of Marxism. The Preface and Introduction are largely devoted to how he intends to accomplish this task and are well worth reading from a methodological standpoint alone. We have seen that Löwy highlights the impact on Marx’s thinking of his actual interactions with politically conscious workers. It is Löwy’s thesis that it is “through an active exchange with this social environment (as well as with the Left-Hegelian currents) that the young Marx formulated the seminal kernel of a new world-view, the philosophy of *praxis*, which provides the theoretical foundation for his conception of revolution as proletarian self-emancipation” (Preface, p. vii). Löwy posits that the exploration of “socio-historical settings” is indispensable for fully comprehending a theory, in this case Marx’s theory of revolution. This exploration of the socio-historical settings of Marx’s theory is necessary “for understanding the very content, the internal structure and precise significance of what is being studied” (p. 3). It is not merely a historical adjunct. The concept of “settings” includes the socio-philosophical doctrines and political theories of the day.

I would add that virtually all of Marx’s published theoretical writings were written in response to--and often in debate with-- the ideas of his contemporaries, including those on the Left. An obvious example is Marx’s *The Poverty of Philosophy* written in response to the socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s *Philosophy of Poverty*.

Settings, Events, and Ideas

Löwy cites Marx’s dictum that ideas themselves can become material forces. Löwy also avoids a rigid base-superstructure dichotomy. Instead he embraces the notion of totality: thought and social settings are not “congealed in abstract oppositions.” Rather they are “dialectically linked

together and integrated in the historical process” (p. 3). Further, objective events carry more or less significance to political thinkers depending on the state of their theory building. We have already seen the very different significance that the revolt of the Silesian weavers held for Arnold Ruge, who considered it a local, unimportant matter, as opposed to Marx who considered the revolt an important early expression of working class consciousness and a likely forerunner of future working class activities. Marx refers to the revolt as a “literary debut of the German workers” and speaks of their “gigantic infant shoes” (CW 3, 201). Their divergence is especially telling because, until that point, Ruge and Marx had been intellectual companions. Indeed, before this public debate they had teamed up to establish a journal and were its co-editors.

Thus the importance of an event depends in large measure on “its significance *in relation* to the theory.... We thus perceive that, very often, it is not an historical event or a philosophical or political theory ‘in itself’ that influences the development of a doctrine, but the event and the theory as these are grasped and interpreted by that doctrine.” This interplay underscores the active role for the theorist in assimilating the outside event. Löwy suggests that “the doctrinal system ‘selects’ and interprets the settings, events and ideas which are to condition its development” (pp. 5,6). I find this a felicitous perspective.

Yet I believe that it was not only the state of Marx’s theory at that moment which was decisive but rather the broad *trajectory* of his growing allegiance to the working class. In dialectical philosophy, thought reaches out to the future. From this perspective, Marx came to view the Silesian uprising as a forerunner of other activities yet to be undertaken by an increasingly active and self-aware working class. Löwy, too, terms Marx’s support for the Silesian weavers “anticipatory” in light of the immaturity of the workers’ movement organizationally and theoretically at that time.

PART 3. BIGGEST SHORTCOMING: THE PHILOSOPHI DIMENSION

Löwy credits Engels with recognizing in the development of ideas the reciprocal character of condition and receptivity, of the external event and how it is registered internally. But Löwy neglects to trace this insight to its true author, Hegel. Hegel said of teleological activity that: “in it the end is the beginning, the consequent the ground, the effect the cause, that it is a becoming of what has become, that in it only what already exists comes into existence...”(Cf. Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, translated by A. V. Miller, Humanities Press International, 1969, p. 748). More generally, Löwy overlooks Marx’s selective appropriation -- a term coined by Norman Levine -- of Hegel’s dialectical philosophy.

This is not to deny that Löwy is a nuanced and comprehensive historian of ideas who is aware there is a philosophical dimension of Marxian thought. For instance, in his essay, “From the ‘Logic’ of Hegel to the Finland Station in Petrograd,” Löwy demonstrated the practical impact of Lenin’s reading, while in exile, of Hegel’s *Logic* on his political thinking at the fateful moment of his return to Russia (See his *On Changing the World*, Humanities Press International, 1993).

Yet Löwy stands apart from the “Hegelian Marxists” of the twentieth century, such as Lukács, Korsch, Marcuse and Dunayevskaya, who see in that philosophical dimension the very essence of Marx’s concept of revolution. Dunayevskaya identified Marx’s concept of “revolution in

permanence” as a red thread that ran through his lifetime of political work; she interpreted that concept as rooted in Hegel’s dialectic of negativity. She wrote: “Marx dug deep into revolution, permanent revolution. Marx’s unyielding concentration on revolution, on revolutionary praxis--revolutionary ruthless critique of all that exists--reveals that dialectical philosophy was the basis of the totality of Marx’s work, not only in philosophy but in practice, and in both politics and economics.... Marx transformed Hegel’s revolution in philosophy into a philosophy of revolution” (*Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation, and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution*, University of Illinois Press, second edition, 1991, p. xxiii). Löwy, in contrast, tends to downplay the relation between Marx’s philosophical perspective and his theory of revolution. For Löwy it was an important advance in Marx’s concept of revolutionary agency--and there is much truth in this-- when he gave up the idea of “philosophical communism” in which “revolution begins in the brain of the philosopher.” Revolutionary impulses and ideas, Marx said explicitly only a few years later in “The Communist Manifesto,” have their source in a revolutionary class, the proletariat. But it is important to keep in mind that Marx characterized the revolutionary proletariat as both independent and “self-conscious,” that is, aware of its historical role, not a thoughtless mass. Recall, too, that Marx had seen in the uprising of the Silesian weavers a “consciousness of the nature of the proletariat,” the expression of a “philosophic people” (CW 3, p. 201).

Marx added: “As philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *spiritual* weapons in philosophy” (CW 3, p. 187). According to Löwy, however, this well-known formulation is “not yet Marxist” (p. 59). I would argue that for Marx there was no contradiction between recognizing the proletariat as the agency of revolution, and, recognizing the philosophical dimension in revolution.

The 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts

It is in his treatment of the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* that Löwy most clearly falls short in his recognition of the philosophic dimension in Marx’s theory of revolution. Löwy’s appreciation of the *Manuscripts* lies primarily in their economic analysis of the proletarian condition.

Because Löwy tends to avoid discussing the philosophic aspect of Marx’s theory of revolution, he shrinks away from many of the assertions in the manuscript, “Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole.” Dunayevskaya, in contrast, hailed that manuscript. She saw both its criticism of Hegel in limiting transcendence only to the realm of thought, and, at the same time, its embrace of Hegel’s dialectic method, which Marx “praises, takes over, develops...” What Hegel calls “the dialectic of negativity,” Dunayevskaya wrote, Marx affirms as “the moving and creative principle.” She insisted “that for Marx as for us today, nothing short of a philosophy, a total outlook--which Marx first called, *not* ‘Communism’ but ‘Humanism,’ can answer the manifold needs of the proletariat” (*Marxism & Freedom*, Humanity Books, 2000, pp. 57-59).

Löwy criticizes the *Manuscripts* as “still somewhat Feuerbachian.” Why? Because, Löwy claims, Feuerbach’s critique of religious alienation is simply applied to economics by Marx: Feuerbach’s

God is transposed into private property; atheism is transposed into communism. I see this as an oversimplification of Marx's dialectical and complex train of thought.

The Relation between Alienated Labor and Private Property

To demonstrate this I will focus on one such abridgment of the dialectic by Löwy. Löwy claims that this unwarranted parallelism of Marx's analysis of society with Feuerbach's analysis of religious alienation led Marx to mistakenly attribute private property to the alienated quality of the labor that produces it rather than the more obvious other-way-around: "This parallelism even leads him [Marx] to see in private property not the cause but the *consequence* of the alienation" (p. 86).

While Löwy's effort to correct Marx's purported error may appear to be of little consequence, it is connected to a significant political difference: Seemingly, Löwy sees property ownership as more fundamental than the activity of laboring. From Löwy's standpoint, socialism is essentially the elimination of private property and its replacement with public or state *ownership of the means of production*. This sharp theoretical difference makes it worthwhile to follow Marx's dialectical thinking in order to evaluate properly Löwy's claim that Marx made an error of reversal. In the manuscript on "Estranged Labour" Marx made it clear: "Thus through estranged labour man not only creates his relationship to the object and to the act of production as to powers [men] that are alien and hostile to him; he also creates the relationship in which other men stand to his production and to his product, and the relationship in which he stands to these other men. Just as he creates his own production as the loss of his reality, as his punishment; his own product as a loss, as a product not belonging to him; so he creates the domination of the person who does not produce over production and over the product.... Through *estranged, alienated labour*, then, the worker produces the relationship to this labour of a man alien to labour and standing outside it. The relationship of the worker to labour creates the relation to it of the capitalist... *Private property* is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of *alienated labour*...though private property appears to be the reason, the cause of alienated labour, it is rather its consequence, just as the gods are *originally* not the cause but the effect of man's intellectual confusion. Later this relationship becomes reciprocal. Only at the culmination of the development of private property does this, its secret, appear again, namely, that on the one hand it is the *product* of alienated labour, and that on the other it is the *means* by which labour alienates itself, the *realisation of this alienation*" (CW 3, pp. 279, 280). This passage demonstrates, I believe, that Marx is more fundamentally concerned with human activity, with the "relationship of the worker to labour," than property forms *per se*. While Marx did use an analogy from religion, his attention is steadily fixed on social relations of production.

Dunayevskaya reaffirmed that: "In the alienation of the object of labor is only crystallized the alienation in the very activity of labor. It follows that: The struggle against private property is the struggle not only against the alienation of the product of labor but against the alienation of the very activity of labor as any kind of self-development" (*Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, Second Edition, University of Illinois Press, 1991, p. 126). In Dunayevskaya's view, Marx held that property forms are derived from social relations in production. She wrote additionally: "For Marx the abolition of private property was a means toward the abolition of alienated labor, not an end in itself.... He never tired of stressing that what

is of primary importance is *not* the form of property, but the mode of production. Every mode of production, he said, creates a corresponding form of property..." (*Marxism & Freedom*, Humanity Books, 2000, p. 61).

The Place of Alienation in Marx's Thinking

In keeping with his slighting of the alienation of labor, Löwy shows an overall failure to recognize the crucial role played by Marx's concept of alienation not only in the early writings but also in his more decidedly political-economic works as well. Drawing from "Results of the Immediate Process of Production," written some twenty years after the 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and intended as the concluding chapter of volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx wrote: "The activity of labour-power, i.e. labour, *objectifies* itself in the course of production and so becomes value. But since the labour has ceased to belong to the worker even before he starts to work, what objectified itself for him is *alien labour* and hence a value, *capital*, independent of his own labour-power" (Penguin edition, p. 1016).

Alienation is also integral to Marx's concept of labor power as a commodity to be sold and bought, and thereby to wage labor, perhaps capital's most distinctive feature. And the *recuperation of our alienated human powers* both as individuals and collectively as members of the human community remains, I believe, central to the Marxian goal of social revolution.

Istvan Meszaros in his never-outdated *Marx's Theory of Alienation* shows the tremendous range of Marx's concept of alienation--expressed in humanity's relation to nature, in the person's relation to herself and to others, and in relation to all humankind. Further, Meszaros points to Marx's originality and creativity in making the concept of alienation the keystone of his critique of capital. Lastly, Meszaros demonstrates that it was Hegel rather than Feuerbach who provided the philosophic inspiration for Marx's concept of alienation: "Consequently Hegel anticipated to a much greater extent than Feuerbach the Marxian grasp of history, although even Hegel could only find 'the *abstract, logical, speculative* expression for the movement of history" (*Marx's Theory of Alienation*, The Merlin Press, 1970, p. 43).

Dunayevskaya likewise saw alienated labor as "the most fundamental contradiction of capitalism": "Marx's analysis of labor--and it is that which distinguishes him from all others, not only the tendencies in Marx's day, from which he had to break, but the Socialists and Communists of our day--goes much further than the economic structure of society. His analysis goes not only to class relations, but to actual human relations. What is wrong with other critics is that they speak of labor as an abstraction instead of seeing that labor under capitalism "materializes itself in an inhuman way..." (*Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 126). Löwy acknowledges that the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* consider the proletariat as an alienated class. He is critical nonetheless of Marx for not approaching the proletarian revolution "except through the abstract angle of the relation between the proletariat as an alienated class and [of] communism as a movement of disalienation" (p. 90). In light of Löwy's tendencies to downplay both the centrality of Marx's concept of alienation and the philosophic dimension of his theory of revolution, it comes as no surprise that Löwy chafes at Marx's concepts of disalienation and of the "self-transcending of communism."

The Negation of the Negation

Löwy maintains that some themes of the 1844 *Manuscripts* “were to be flatly abandoned by Marx in his later writings” (p. 90). These themes include “positive humanism” and the idea that communism is not the final goal but “merely the ‘revolutionary moment’ beyond which lies ‘truly human society’” (p. 90). These issues turn on the all-important concept of the negation of the negation. Löwy, again, sees Marx as recapitulating Feuerbach’s line of thought by conceiving a direct parallel between religious alienation and the alienation of labor. This would transpose the goal of disalienation to atheism, on the one hand, and, in the case of labor, to communism.

But Marx takes pains in his “Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole” to distinguish his appreciation of the negation of the negation from *both* Feuerbach’s stunted, abbreviated concept and from Hegel’s abstract concept. Löwy notes Marx’s favorable assessment of Feuerbach for “his opposing to the negation of the negation, which claims to be the absolute positive, the self-supporting positive, positivity based on itself.” Marx does hold onto this aspect of Feuerbach’s thinking -- positivity based on itself -- and goes further with it. It appears in Marx’s 1844 writings as the idea of “the creation of man through human labour...his *birth* through himself, of his *genesis*” (CW 3, p. 305). This amounts to a *positive humanism* based on itself, not on some other foundation.

However, Marx is critical of Feuerbach’s concept of negation of the negation when it is viewed “*only* as a contradiction of philosophy with itself--as the philosophy which affirms theology (the transcendent, etc.) after having denied it...” (CW 3, p. 329). Marx sees no need to remain with atheism as a negation of God which then “postulates the *existence of man* through this *negation*; but socialism as socialism no longer stands in any need of such a mediation. It proceeds from the *theoretically and practically* sensuous consciousness of man and of nature as the *essence*” (CW 3, p. 306).

This does not mean a rejection of the *Hegelian* concept of negation of the negation, however. For in his 1844 “Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic,” Marx also identifies Hegel’s concept of negativity as the most crucial point for his own dialectical vision. He does so early in the essay, when he refers to “the outstanding achievement of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and of its final outcome, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle...” (CW 3, p. 332).

Marx affirms the real human being and practical sensuous consciousness in the following stirring passage: “Whenever real, corporeal *man*, man with his feet firmly on the solid ground, man exhaling and inhaling all the forces of nature, *posits* his real, objective, *essential powers* as alien objects by his externalization, it is not the *act of positing* which is the subject in this process: it is the subjectivity of *objective essential powers*, whose action, therefore, must also be something *objective*” (CW 3, p. 336). As we might expect, Marx takes Hegel to task for considering the negation of negation solely in the sphere of ideas.

Yet Marx also credits Hegel with discovering the only *true and positive concept of the negation of the negation*. We can discern both sides of Marx’s critique of Hegel in the following passage: “But because Hegel has 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 inherent in it as the only true act and spontaneous activity of all being, he has found the *abstract, logical, speculative* expression for the movement of history, which is not yet the *real* history of man as a given subject..." (CW 3, p. 329). Löwy reads Marx's notion of disalienation far too narrowly. Marx conceives of disalienation as a process by which the human being's "objective essential powers" are recuperated into the self. Alienation in this context consists of humanity's separation from the products through which "he can *express* his life in real, sensuous objects." The negation of this alienation in the labor process would transform it not narrowly, but grandly, into an activity for individual self-expression as well as for meeting social needs.

It includes a social aspect because Marx's concept of disalienation includes an objectivity of one person for another person. "*To be* objective, natural and sensuous, and at the same time to have object, nature and sense outside oneself, or oneself to be object, nature and sense for a third party, is one and the same thing" (CW 3, p. 336). The human being's hunger after "objects" includes hunger for other persons.(2)

For Marx, the supersession of alienation considered generally comes about "through the supersession of the objective world in its estranged mode of being," and most fundamentally in the alienated labor that characterizes the capitalist mode of production. Marx returns to the metaphor of religion to explain his concept of positive humanism: "...atheism is humanism mediated with itself through the supersession of religion, whilst communism is humanism mediated with itself through the supersession of private property. Only through the supersession of this mediation--which is itself, however, a necessary premise--does positively self-deriving humanism, *positive* humanism, come into being" (CW 3, pp. 341,342).

Positive Humanism

Löwy sees "positive humanism" and the related notion of the limitations of communism and of its transcendence, as ideas of the young Marx "that were to be flatly abandoned in his later writings" (p. 90). Löwy is troubled and perplexed by Marx's assertion that: "Communism is the position as the negation of the negation, and is hence the *actual* phase necessary for the next stage of historical development in the process of human emancipation and rehabilitation. *Communism* is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism as such is not the goal of human development, the form of human society" (CW 3, p. 306). Once again, we find Löwy unappreciative of this dialectical and open-ended dimension of Marx's theory of revolution. Löwy likewise sounds critical of the idealistic tenor of Marx speaking "even of the 'self-transcending' of communism and its 'transcendence' by consciousness" in the following passage: "It takes *actual* communist action to abolish actual private property. History will lead to it; and this movement, which *in theory* we already know to be a self-transcending movement, will constitute in actual fact a very rough and protracted process. But we must regard it as a real advance to have at the outset gained a consciousness of the limited character as well as the goal of this historical movement -- and a consciousness which reaches out beyond it" (CW 3, p. 313). The Marxist-Humanist project of conceptualizing a society beyond capitalism is precisely an exercise of "a consciousness which reaches out beyond" the existing social order. The impetus to reach beyond is essential to dialectical philosophy.

Did the concept of positive humanism disappear in Marx's later writings as Löwy asserts? I think not. In *Capital*, volume 3, to take just one example, Marx stated: "The realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper.... The true realm of freedom, *the development of human powers as an end in itself*, begins beyond it, though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity at its basis. The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite" (Penguin edition, 1981, pp. 958, 959, my emphasis). This statement is breathtaking in its vision yet practical enough to speak to American workers today who are overburdened by long hours. It is drawn from *Capital*, Marx's theoretically most mature work.

In sum, the most important deficiency in Löwy's treatment of the 1844 *Manuscripts* is that he diminishes the extent and significance of Marx's appropriation of Hegel's dialectical philosophy with its core concept of the negation of the negation. In contrast, Dunayevskaya uncovered Marx's appreciation and use of Hegel's dialectic in both the early writings *and* in his later "economic" works. She wrote: "From the very beginning Marx, in his critique of the Hegelian dialectic, dug so deeply into its roots in thought and in reality that it signaled a revolution in philosophy and at the same time a philosophy of revolution" (*Philosophy and Revolution*, Lexington Books, 1989, p. 48).

PART 4. WORKING CLASS SELF-EMANCIPATION

Löwy's thesis is that Marx's actual experiences with workers and their socialist organizations which began when he arrived in Paris in November, 1843, transformed him from a "philosophical communist," one of the several Left Hegelians who believed that *their ideas* would penetrate and give direction to workers. Within the framework of philosophic communism, workers were seen as passive and lacking political consciousness. Within four years, Marx had achieved the idea of workers' self-emancipation through *their independent thought and organization*. Marx became reoriented to "*the communist movement considered as an independent expression of the worker masses...*" Löwy credits this intellectual/political development largely to "*his direct contacts with the workers' societies*" (pp. 79, 68).

Marx now conceptualized a dialectical reciprocity between socialist theory and the revolutionary proletariat. Thus in *The Holy Family* which Marx and Engels wrote together in August 1844, they criticize "all political ideologies that counterpose an 'enlightened minority' to the 'ignorant masses'" (p. 98). Rather the workers recognize in their associations that they have needs beyond their immediate, concrete needs as workers; they have needs as human beings. Further, unlike the Left Hegelians Marx and Engels were criticizing, "the *mass-minded*, communist, workers employed, for instance, in the Manchester or Lyons workshops, do not believe that by '*pure thinking*' they will be able to argue away their industrial masters and their own practical debasement. They are most painfully aware of the *difference* between *being* and *thinking*, between *consciousness* and *life*. They know that property, capital, money, wage-labour and the like are no ideal figments of the brain but very practical, *very objective products of their self-estrangement* and that therefore they must be abolished in a practical, objective way..." (CW 4, p. 53, emphasis added). In short, Marx was impressed by the consciousness of the working class as well as its political dedication. He wrote: "One must know the studiousness, the craving for knowledge, the moral energy and the unceasing urge for development of the French and English

workers to be able to form an idea of the *human* nobility of this movement.... a large part of the English and French proletariat is already *conscious* of its historic task and is constantly working to develop that consciousness into complete clarity” (p. 102; see also CW 4, p. 37).

PART 5. CONCLUSIONS

Löwy has demonstrated that this period of social, political and intellectual ferment; this place, Paris; and these direct encounters with radical workers, served as the inspiration for Marx’s 1844 writings. What then is the role of the theoretician who is not a manual worker? The role of the theoretician becomes, in Löwy’s words, “to help the proletariat in its intellectual labour, in the evolution of its consciousness, as yet vague and formless, towards complete clarity and coherence” (pp. 102, 103). Marx was to attempt and succeed in doing precisely that by authoring the *Communist Manifesto* at the request of the Communist League. Earlier, while in Brussels after the government forced him to leave France, Marx gave lectures on political economy to workers, later published as *Wages, Price and Profit*.

Also in Brussels in February 1846, Marx together with Engels organized their first political organization, the Communist Correspondence Committee, with the intent of establishing links between communists throughout Europe. We find no separation of Marx the philosopher from Marx the organization man, of Marx the theoretician and Marx the educator.

Löwy considers Marx’s 1845 *Theses on Feuerbach* as the first text to outline the foundations of the philosophy of praxis. Löwy writes: “Marx thus finds in the *revolutionary* praxis of the proletariat the prototype of truly human activity, which is neither purely ‘theoretical’ nor egoistically passive, but objective and practical-critical: ‘Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from conceptual objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity’” (p. 104). For Löwy, the *Theses on Feuerbach* establishes the concept of revolutionary praxis as the foundation in theory for self-emancipation of the proletariat through revolution.

Is this revolution to be political or social? In answer to this question, which I posed at the start concerning the relation between political and social revolution, Löwy concludes that Marx saw both political and social aspects in every socialist revolution. It is political in that it overthrows the old power; it dissolves the old society. More specifically, Marx states in his “Critical Marginal Notes on the Article by a Prussian”:

“*Revolution* in general--the *overthrow* of the existing power and *dissolution* of the old relationships--is a *political act*. But *socialism* cannot be realized without *revolution*. It needs this *political act* insofar as it needs *destruction* and *dissolution*. But where its *organizing activity* begins, where its *proper object*, its *soul*, comes to the fore--there socialism throws off the *political cloak*” (CW 3, p. 206). Löwy has shown clearly that Marx had dismissed the idea of a solely political redress of society’s ills as early as the 1844 revolt of the Silesian weavers. In this spirit, I think we need to emphasize the need for a *philosophical, social revolution*. Following the thinking of Marx depicted in this book, I argue that we need a social revolution that will take humankind beyond the rights of isolated citizens in a bourgeois state, to full human emancipation in a stateless society. Only then will the narrow, abstract mandates of civil rights be superseded.

Only then will the individual be able to take root in society's soil and develop into a full member of the human community, into a "social individual."

In conclusion, despite deficiencies in its discussion of the relation of Marx's theory of revolution to dialectical philosophy, this book makes an important contribution to revolutionary Marxist thought. It does so particularly by richly documenting its thesis of an integral connection between the development of Marx's theory of revolution and the early thinking and activity of the working class which he interacted with after his arrival in Paris in 1843. This close connection itself reflects Marx's distinctive theory of social revolution: the self-emancipation of the working class through its own praxis.

[--Eli C. Messinger](#)

NOTES

1. My thanks to Kevin Anderson, Alex Hanna, Matt Garrett, and Chris Waldron for their help in preparing this for publication.
2. Virtually all contemporary schools of psychoanalysis highlight this insight, most notably by the interpersonal theories of Harry Stack Sullivan and the object relations school of Margaret Mahler and D. W. Winnicott (cf. Jay R. Greenberg and Stephen A. Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, Harvard University Press, 1983).