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Workers as Reason: The Development of a New Relation of Worker and Intellectual in American Marxist Humanism

The worker's antagonism to the machine has traveled a long way from the time when he simply wished to smash it. Now what he wants to have done with is his very *work*. He wants to do something entirely different – express all his natural and acquired powers in an activity worthy of him as a *human* being.

Raya Dunayevskaya, 1951¹

The traditional perception of the American working class as apolitical or even backward, since it has never built a labour party of its own or embraced Marxist parties in any significant way, has been challenged in recent decades by numerous writers who have highlighted the militancy and social consciousness that have been integral to the myriad experiences of the US labour movement.² The period since World War II provides especially powerful testimony of this combative legacy. The wildcat strikes

¹ See 'Cooperative Form of Labour vs. Abstract Labour' [March 2, 1951], in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9299.

² See especially Braverman 1974, Montgomery 1979, Hinshaw and Le Blanc 2000, and Rosemont 2003. For a perspective on such developments by a rank-and-file worker, see Denby 1989.

in the coal, steel, and automobile industries in the 1950s, the formation of militant black caucuses in Northern and Southern unions in the 1960s, and the ‘blue-collar blues’ which defined much social discourse in the US in the 1970s all challenged the traditional view that this ‘working class without socialism’³ was lacking in social consciousness and militancy. While much has been written on these and other labour struggles in the post-World-War-II era, the full history of the American labour movement’s contribution to what some have called ‘the struggle against work’ remains to be written. Though that cannot be attempted here, we will focus on one especially important moment in the battle over the nature of work – the coal miners’ strikes in West Virginia from 1949 to 1951, the first wildcat strikes against automation in US history. The reason for focusing on these strikes in this essay is that they help illuminate how revolutionary-Marxist currents which aim to comprehend and connect to spontaneous mass struggles are challenged by new forms of proletarian subjectivity.

I. Coal miners and the US labour movement in the 1940s

Coal miners have long been known as the ‘shock troops’ of the US labour movement. In the 1940s, their reputation was further enhanced when half-a-million went on strike in the midst of World War II in open defiance of the ‘no strike pledge’ supported by virtually every US labour leader. Remarkable as were the actions of the miners in 1943, it was by no means exceptional. Over two million US workers were involved in strikes in 1943. The middle and late 1940s marked one of the most militant periods in American labour history. As one participant in the labour movement at the time put it,

Labor unrest . . . was a great public concern in the US in the final months of the Second World War. All three major labor centers – the AFL, the CIO, and the railroad brotherhoods – participated in a record number of strikes.⁴

The number of strikes by US workers further increased with the end of World War II. In November 1945, the United Auto Workers (UAW) went on strike for 113 days against General Motors. By January 1946, industry-wide strikes had spread to the meatpacking, electrical, and steel industries. In February

³ The phrase is from a letter of Anton Pannekoek to Cornelius Castoriadis of November 8, 1953. It is found in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 10901.

⁴ Richter 1994, p. 19.

1946, the number of man-hours lost to strikes rose to 23,000,000, a historic record in the US.⁵ Coal miners were a central part of this ferment; they went out on strike again in 1946, obtaining a Health and Welfare Fund.

With the end of World War II, 12 million men and women in the armed forces and another eight million engaged in military production were about to flood the labour market. Fears mounted of a return to conditions of massive unemployment and economic depression that characterised the 1930s. US workers had not endured the indignities of warfare on the battlefield and declining wages and living conditions at home in order to passively accept a return to such conditions. Many US workers were determined to obtain their share of the 'freedoms' promised to others as an outcome of the war.

US capital responded in a variety of ways to the militancy of US labour. One was the passage of anti-labour legislation aimed at curbing union and strike activity (in 1947 alone, state legislatures enacted the largest number of anti-labour laws since the Haymarket riots of 1886).⁶ Congress also passed the notorious Taft-Hartley Act, which imposed severe fines and penalties on unions calling strikes that threaten a 'national emergency'. Laws were also passed requiring every union to file an affidavit showing that no union official was associated with Communist Party. Yet such directly repressive measures were not the only form of capital's response to labour militancy. Faced with incessant demands by workers for higher wages, capital sought to secure greater control over the production process. Considerable investments were made in mechanisation and labour-saving devices in order to boost productivity, even as workers obtained higher wages. One of the most striking expressions of this was the automobile industry's response to the strikes carried out by the UAW in the years immediately following World War II. By 1948, the UAW won the first contract with a major industry which tied wages to cost of living increases. In exchange, the UAW included in its contract the famous Paragraph 8, which granted the company full control over production processes and procedures.

Most labour leaders were fully willing to go along with such an arrangement. A basic trade-off defined their perspective: in exchange for substantial wage increases, the union leadership acquiesced in the introduction of increased mechanisation and speed-up. Such an approach was not adopted without

⁵ Rayback 1968, p. 390.

⁶ Rayback 1968, p. 396.

considerable opposition from rank-and-file workers who did not wish to completely surrender control over production procedures. One Detroit autoworker wrote:

Eighteen or twenty of us worked on operation number sixty-eight, a job in building autos. We worked with one foreman we'd broken in. We ran the job as we saw fit and worked forty or forty-five minutes each hour. We'd get production ahead and then sit down to talk or rest or kid around. We never worked more than forty-five minutes of an hour, and sometimes, only thirty-five.

But, by the late 1940s, this changed:

[The foreman] called me into his office and said, 'You're to work as I say. You work on the hour, and don't stop until I say so. Go out and tell the boys.' He handed me the union rulebook. I said, 'I've been in the plant for six years. There is nothing in the rulebook which says a worker has to tell another worker what to do. If you want them to know something you tell them yourself'.⁷

It soon became clear, however, that the union leadership would no longer challenge such changes in production procedures because of its trade-off of wage increases for total management control of production.

UMWA leader John L. Lewis fully endorsed this approach of obtaining higher wages in exchange for granting management control over the process of production. As one study put it,

The union believed that modernization of the mines through mechanization would be crucial in saving the industry. The union imposed high wages on all operators, thus pressuring them to mechanize. It was the union's philosophy that a number of mines too small to be mechanized should go out of business. In 1950, *Fortune* labelled Lewis 'the best salesman the machinery industry ever had'.⁸

The dynamics of capital accumulation in the US in the late 1940s confirmed Marx's analysis of the overall trajectory of capitalist production. Capital initially confronts workers' demands for higher wages by trying to repress

⁷ Denby 1989, p. 124.

⁸ Takamiya 1978, p. 85. For more on Lewis's attitudes toward mechanisation and automation, see Dubofsky and Van Tine 1977, pp. 476–501 especially.

and contain their struggles. When this proves impossible, capital responds by reorganising the production process through increased mechanisation so as to boost the productivity of labour, even as wage rates rise. The incessant drive toward automated production in US industry in the post-World-War-II era flowed from the militancy of US labour, not its passivity. These conditions set the stage for the coal miners' strikes of 1949–51.

II. A new movement from practice

A series of strikes by coal miners in 1949 was precipitated by the expiration of the contract between the UMWA and the coal companies in June 1949. The conflict between the miners and the companies initially seemed to be over traditional issues. UMWA leader John L. Lewis was demanding a six-hour day and a five-day work week and a doubling from 20 cents to 40 cents of the royalty from each ton of union coal mined into the UMWA's Health and Welfare fund, which helped pay for the miners' health and pension benefits. An increase in wages and benefits was thus the main issue on the minds of UMWA leaders as they sparred with the coal operators for a new contract. When the contract expired on 30 June 1949, however, Lewis did not call the miners out on strike, as usually would have been the case, given the solid tradition of 'No Contract, No Work' in the UMWA. He instead declared that miners would work a three-day week until they received a serious offer from the operators. He also called a series of selective regional strikes to deplete the stockpiles of coal. Lewis was trying to manoeuvre around the recently-passed Taft-Hartley Act, which imposed severe fines and penalties on unions that call industry-wide strikes.

A new development had arisen several months before, however, which made subsequent events take some unexpected turns. On 6 May 1949, the first continuous miner was installed in Bethlehem Steel's Carolina-Idamay mine in Marion Country, West Virginia. Though the word automation had not yet been coined, it marked its first introduction into US industry. The continuous miner had a dramatic and immediate effect when it was introduced into the mines. By automating the extraction process, the continuous miner required only one-third as many miners as before. And, by creating a continuous mechanised process of coal extraction, it heightened speed-up and greatly endangered the lives of those left on the job. Andy Phillips, a miner who participated in the strike, described this new development:

Under the traditional mining process, work crews followed each other, and by working harder to catch up, or when a machine broke down, had a chance to rest. And since a boss could be in only one place at a time, he could not watch all the miners all of the time. With the continuous miner all this changed. By stationing himself at the machine, the boss could watch everyone for the entire shift. And there was no catching up. They named the machine well when they called it the continuous miner, because it was truly designed to work without stopping.

But more than that were the conditions of work the new method created. With the head ripping into the face, the powerful whirling bits pulverizing the coal conveyed back and dumped into the waiting buggy, fine coal dust quickly saturated the air, making it impossible to see more than a few feet. Water sprinklers vainly tried to keep the dust down. But that was only part of it. Several running motors on the machine gave off so much heat that the work face became a hot, sweaty, dusty and confining black box. . . . The words are hard to find that can describe what this did to the work force. Here you have the continuous miner, ripping the coal out and spewing it back over the conveyer boom as it swung back and forth until the coal was piled from rib to rib and to the top, virtually entombing the work crew in a confined area where the dust and heat were multiplied many times over. With all the motors running and in an atmosphere super laden with fine coal dust, a single spark from anything – the grinding bit hitting a hard sulphur ball, a spark from any motor, a short in any electrical wire – could turn that face into a raging inferno of death-dealing destruction.⁹

The introduction of the continuous miner thus heightened miners' concerns over health and safety, as well as over working conditions as a whole. The situation became further inflamed in September 1949, when Lewis announced that the coal operators were refusing to make any more payments to the UMWA's Health and Welfare Fund in response to his strategy of keeping the miners at work for three days a week. Almost immediately, workers in two of the largest mines in West Virginia called local union meetings and voted to strike until the payments were resumed. Their decision to strike was not authorised or supported by Lewis. Still, their decision led to a spontaneous regional walkout, as other miners decided to join the strike. In the next weeks, roving pickets shut down mines not only in West Virginia,

⁹ Phillips 1984, p. 12.

but throughout Appalachia. Within a month, over 400,000 coal miners had walked off their jobs.

The scope of this wildcat strike took Lewis by surprise, prompting him to demand, in early January 1950, that local union officials get the workers back to work. Instead of complying with this order, however, a meeting of 300 local officers voted to reject Lewis's demand – the first time something like this had happened to the highly-regarded Lewis, who had almost a mythical stature among miners for his legendary work in leading the UMWA. As miners active in the strike at the time reported:

The [union] hall was jammed with rank-and-file miners vehemently opposed to going to work and eager to express their feelings. Unlike some local union meetings, such as my own where our local union bureaucrat had contacted members they knew were in favor of returning to work to be present and support the District representatives who attacked those of us who spoke up to stay out, the atmosphere in the hall raged with strike fever. 'We've followed Lewis and the District too long already,' one miner bellowed. 'I've lost everything I got, just like a lot of you guys in this hall. But I'll be damned and go to hell before I go back to work now, and I'm ready to send anyone else to hell who tries to go back before we get what we want!' 'We've been hangin' by our thumbs for over six months now,' another declared, 'and we're no closer to a settlement now than we were six months ago. Now it's up to us. I know we can do it, you know we can do it, and we all know it's gonna take all of us to do it if it's gonna get done at all.'¹⁰

A number of issues motivated miners to take such independent action. They were certainly furious at the coal operators' refusal to make payments to the UMWA's Health and Welfare Fund. This was no small issue, as the health of so many had been ruined by working in the mines; the Fund was in part established to rehabilitate the 50,000 former miners who were paraplegics.¹¹ Such concerns dovetailed with miners' concerns over the increase in accidents resulting from the introduction of the continuous miner, which they dubbed 'the man killer'. The strike thereby touched directly on the nature of work itself, as miners asked questions like 'what *kind* of labour should a man perform?' in the face of increasingly dehumanised working conditions.¹²

¹⁰ These statements from miners involved in the strike are quoted in Phillips 1984, p. 20.

¹¹ Goldstein 1990, p. 249.

¹² See Denby 1960, pp. 27–46.

In February 1950, President Harry Truman declared a national emergency over the strike and imposed the drastic Taft-Hartley Act against Lewis and the UMWA. Among other things, this made it illegal for any part of the UMWA to extend strike support to the miners. Any miner who tried to convince another to stay out of work was now subject to contempt of court and heavy fines. This created a drastic situation, with many miners facing total destitution. However, the formation of a Miners' Relief Committee – set up by a number of rank-and-file workers and radical activists in the West Virginia area – helped garner material aid from unionised workers in different parts of the country (especially in Detroit), which greatly helped to ameliorate matters.¹³

Faced with the near-total shutdown of coal production, on 3 March 1950, the coal operators caved in and signed a new contract with the UMWA. Workers received a 70-cent daily wage increase and a 10-cent per ton increase in contributions to the Health and Welfare Fund. Most importantly, for the first time the coal operators agreed to an industry-wide contract with the UMWA – something they had fiercely resisted for years. The National Bituminous Coal Wage Agreement of 1950 marked the beginning of a new era in collective bargaining in the coal industry.¹⁴ Faced with such a massive strike, the operators agreed to Lewis's demand for wage increases and an industry-wide contract, in exchange for a tacit understanding that the union would not contest the introduction of automated production measures like the continuous miner.

As a result, though it appeared that the coal miners had won a major victory with the outcome of the strike, they actually returned to work facing even more dangerous and life-threatening situations than before. As one miner active in the strikes of 1949 and 1950 stated not long after they concluded:

In the past, the UMWA leadership was able to mobilize the miners for battle and overcome all opposition because they were close to the men. But today, the UMWA leadership knows that a full mobilization of the miners means a threat to their own power. The result is the waging of half-hearted battles which lead to defeat. In the last big battle, the strike of '49 and '50, it was

¹³ See Preis 1964, p. 394: 'A number of UAW locals adopted resolutions for a 24-hour national strike to back the miners. The major GM locals in Flint and others throughout the country voted financial aid to the miners and organized food and clothing collections for them. A city-wide Detroit labour caravan carried aid to the hard-pressed miners.'

¹⁴ See Perry 1984, p. 73.

the action of the rank and file which showed Lewis the way. The men had no contract, were working a three day week and were tired of it all. They went out. Not because they loved the contract so much but because they wanted their own contract, which meant a change of life they were living. The men moved and Lewis had to go with them or be left behind. . . . Every time men at a mine [now] go on a wildcat, the district is right on the scene to get the men back to work. Always grievance procedure, no interruption of production. Lewis, at a banquet in Reading, Pa., last fall, said that men must do nothing which might increase the cost of production for the operators. Production is more important than the lives and welfare of the men in the mines.¹⁵

Within less than a decade, thanks in large part to the union leadership's acceptance of the introduction of automated production in the mining industry, the number of miners in the US plummeted from over 500,000 to a little over 150,000.

III. The Marxist Left and the miners' strike

Though the 1949–50 miners' strike failed to redress the problem of the continuous miner, it represented an historically new development. It was one of the largest wildcat strikes in US history. It marked the first time that the miners had openly defied one of the most highly regarded union leaders in America. And the experience of the strike raised the question of what *kind* of labour should humanity perform as miners discussed the impact of the continuous miner on working conditions. A new social consciousness concerning the need to oppose the degradation of work had begun to emerge from a largely spontaneous labour struggle. This set the stage for subsequent wildcat strikes against automation, such as those which plagued the auto and steel industries throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

The coal miners' strikes of 1949–50 also sheds light upon the response of American Marxists to the emergence of new struggles against automated production. The American radical movement did not have a major presence in the coal fields in 1949–50, though radical tendencies ranging from the Molly McGuires to the IWW to the Socialists and Communists had been active in miners' struggles for many years. In 1949–50 the Trotskyist Socialist Workers'

¹⁵ Blizzard 1954, p. 4.

Party had an active, albeit numerically small, local in Morgantown, West Virginia which was directly involved in the strike. Its Morgantown branch largely consisted of members of the Johnson-Forest Tendency (JFT), the opposition tendency inside the SWP headed by C.L.R. James (a.k.a J.R. Johnson) and Raya Dunayevskaya (a.k.a. Freddy Forest). JFT members played a significant role in the strike: several of its members worked in the mines, and they were instrumental in proposing and helping to set up the Miners' Relief Committee which garnered material aid for the wildcat from various union locals around the country.

During the miners' strike, however, the SWP leadership expressed reservations about the Morgantown branch's involvement in the strike. Because of their strident criticism of bureaucracy and strong support for rank-and-file initiatives, JFT members tended to be viewed by SWP leaders as adventurists who were likely to get the party into trouble with the UMWA. The tensions were evident at a 26 February 1950 meeting of SWP trade-union activists held in Youngstown, Ohio. Harry Braverman, then a leading figure in the SWP, stated,

The world 'revolt' was not chosen by us, but by the press; it is an unfortunate word perhaps. . . . To attempt to generalize this into a 'revolt' [against the UMWA leadership] would be dangerous. . . . There is of course such a situation in any union between the men and the International but I think we would be overhasty if we tried to equate the Lewis bureaucracy with the others, say in the steel union. . . . Lewis has deep loyalty from the miners.

Braverman nevertheless congratulated the Morgantown members on their 'fine job' of organising the Miners' Relief Committee, which 'pushed the situation from a local question and made it into a national one'.¹⁶ George Novack, another SWP leader, was even more emphatic about the need not to be seen as opposing the UMWA leadership. In a letter to Dunayevskaya (who was living in Pittsburgh at the time and who had made several trips to Morgantown during the strike) Novack stated:

Lewis was under heavy pressure from the ranks and is likewise seeking support for [his] own bureaucratic interests. This is the positive element in [his] move which we have sought to bring forward and utilized for our

¹⁶ See 'Minutes of Tri-State Meeting [of Socialist Workers' Party] on Miners' Strike,' February 26, 1950, in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 1490-91.

progressive aims. . . . Unity and solidarity in struggle will have to be promoted by exerting pressure upon the union leaders rather than by direct connections established through the ranks of the rival union organization.¹⁷

None of the SWP leaders mentioned at the time that a prime motivation behind the walkout was concern over the introduction of the continuous miner.

It should come as no surprise that the Johnson-Forest Tendency welcomed the new phenomenon of wildcat strikes against automation. James and his colleagues had been promoting for years the idea of workers' self-activity in the face of what they saw as the tendency towards bureaucratic state capitalism, as evidenced not alone in Stalinist Russia but world-wide. In their 1947 booklet *The Invading Socialist Society*, James and Dunayevskaya argued that the focus of workers' struggles was undergoing a radical shift, in that the proletariat was ready, on a world scale, to revolt not just against the unequal distribution of surplus-value, but against value production itself.¹⁸ In the same year, the JFT published *The American Worker* (by Ria Stone), which chronicled the growing dissatisfaction of American workers with bureaucratic production and management methods. Moreover, in 1947, the JFT issued (in bulletin form) the first English-language edition of parts of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, especially the essay 'Alienated Labour'. By the late 1940s, the JFT had become well-known in the American Trotskyist movement for its emphasis on 'alienated labour' and workers' struggles against it. The emergence of a spontaneous wildcat strike centring not so much on the proceeds of labour, wages and benefits, as on the very nature of the labour process itself, seemed to be in line with their perspective.

Nevertheless, different attitudes within the group toward the coal miners' strikes ultimately led to its break-up, although this did not become explicit until 1955. This can be discerned from the correspondence carried on between James and Dunayevskaya between 1949, when the strike began, and 1951, when the JFT broke from the SWP. The ramifications of this issue extend far beyond the debates carried out by a small circle of radicals fifty years ago, for it touches on the very relation of spontaneous workers' struggles to the 'historic right to exist' of a Marxist tendency.

¹⁷ Letter of George Novack [William Warde] of 4 April 1950, in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9234.

¹⁸ See James et al. 1947, pp. 62–3.

IV. A new movement from theory

During the period of the miners' general strike, James, Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee Boggs (the third main figure in the JFT) were engaged in an intense three-way philosophical correspondence. Their letters centred on Lenin's commentary of 1914–15 on Hegel's *Science of Logic* and the dialectical development of Marx's *Capital*. Though some of this theoretical discussion preceded the 1949–50 strike, it was clearly affected by it. As Dunayevskaya put it at the height of the strike on 15 February 1950,

Just as the 1945–46 general strike transformed the abstract Russian question on property forms into one of actual production relations, so at present the struggle of the miners and the new content they have infused into 'No Contract, No Work' is what gave me the impulse to go into the essential dialectical development of Marx himself.¹⁹

The concepts in Marx which took on special importance in the correspondence between James and his colleagues in this period concerned the despotic *plan* of capital and the *form* of freely associated labour. They strongly challenged the view, held by many Marxists of the Second and Third Internationals, that in *Capital* and elsewhere Marx contrasts the 'anarchy of the market' to the need for planned social production.²⁰ James and his colleagues focused instead on how capitalism is based on the separation of the labourers from the objective conditions of production by rendering the labourer 'owner' of nothing but her capacity to labour. Torn from the 'natural workshop' of the soil, labour suffers an internal fracturing between subject and object from the very birth of the capitalist production process. Capitalism's aim is to bring labourers together for the sake of extracting surplus-value. Yet the new *form* of cooperation born from the capitalist production process rests upon a despotic *plan* – the despotic plan of capital. As Dunayevskaya put it in draft essay on form and plan sent to James and Boggs on 27 December 1950, 'we then have the plan of the capitalist to bring the workers together for purposes of extracting unpaid labor: it is despotic in form and individual in content'.²¹

¹⁹ 'Discussion on new form of book-in-the-making', 15 February 1950, in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 1585.

²⁰ For a detailed discussion on how this perspective permeated much of the perspective of both the Second International and Stalinism, see Hudis 1998.

²¹ 'Presentation on Form and Plan' [27 December 1950], in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9250.

At first, this despotism seems to be due to the presence of machines in the labour process; the workers then seek to break them up. Later, it becomes clear that this despotism has a *class* basis, in the ownership of productive property by the capitalist class. As capitalism develops, however, the despotic form of capital runs deeper than even the personal domination of capitalist over the worker. It becomes integral to the very rhythm and nature of work itself. As the very activity of labour becomes ‘machine-like’, and hence alien to the labourer, the worker revolts not only against the personifications of capitalist production, but against the capital relation itself. As Dunayevskaya wrote in another manuscript sent to James in 1951,

The machine sweeps away the technical reasons for ‘the annexation of the worker to a detail function.’ But while this undermined the *subjective* authority of the capitalist, it encrusted the planned despotism with the *objectivity* of the machine which took over the disciplining of labor. . . . The fact therefore is that whether the capitalist is there ‘in person’ or not, or whether the technology ‘in itself’ needs the detail laborer or a man fit for a variety of functions, the worker is confronted with *an already existing material condition of production*. He can do nothing but subordinate himself to it, to this alien force. Management over social labor which in manufacture was ‘purely subjective’ is now ‘purely objective.’

Yet this does not quell what Marx called (in his *Poverty of Philosophy*)²² the workers’ quest for universality:

The abolition of the division of labor would mean its bursting out of the old value form and an entirely new mode of labor in an entirely new form appear. The immanence of this breaks down entirely the psychology of civil society and the worker balks at productivity of labor, as a capitalistic function of order, monotony, uniformity, intensity.²³

Dunayevskaya therefore argued:

Not a single step ahead can be taken out of the chaos and the plan, the privacy of monopoly and the community of state power, economic crises

²² See Marx 1976a, p. 190: ‘What characterizes the division of labour in the automatic workshop is that labour has there completely lost its specialized character. But the moment every special development stops, the need for universality, the tendency towards an integral development of the individual begins to be felt’.

²³ ‘Cooperative Form of Labor vs. Abstract Labor’ [2 March 1951], in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9303–05.

and world wars . . . *until that one thing, the mode of labor, is changed.* Otherwise all the old crap reappears. And that is why Marx's whole point, the logic of his entire work, was not 'plan' vs. 'anarchy' but the despotic plan of the capitalist vs. the association of free men. . . . An absolutely new form of labor would have to arise.²⁴

If all of this is the thrust of Marx's work, why then have many 'Marxists' insisted on posing 'the anarchy of the market' vs. 'planned production' as the *pons asini* of a radical critique of capitalism? Is it simply that they have not read Marx carefully enough?

I would suggest that the problem lies deeper, in the objective conditions of capitalist production, which, as Marx put it, produces 'a transposition in consciousness' that afflicts the nature of even radical critique.²⁵ Capitalist production centres on the reduction of concrete labour to abstract labour through the medium of socially necessary labour time. Abstract labour is the substance of value, which shows itself in a social process of exchange. This exchange process is indeed anarchic and chaotic. When the value-form is viewed outside of production, from the vantage-point of the circulation process, capitalism *necessarily* appears based on anarchy and chaos instead of on the uniformity established through the despotic plan of capital.

So objective is this problem that even Marx had not clarified the matter to his satisfaction until he wrote *Capital*, Volume I. Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Dunayevskaya noted, is his most 'economic' work in which the theoretical categories are connected to the production process only abstractly. In the *Critique*, 'Value appears like a *deduction* your mind makes instead of a *reduction* to which your concrete labor has been subjected to'.²⁶ The situation is very different in Volume I of *Capital* (1867), where Marx asks the basic question, 'Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labour as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity?'²⁷ He answers: 'Clearly, from this form itself'. The peculiar social character of labour under capitalism, the reduction of concrete labour to one

²⁴ Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9283.

²⁵ Cf. Marx 1981, p. 136: 'This inverted relationship necessarily gives rise, even in the simple relation of production itself, to a correspondingly inverted conception of the situation, a transposed consciousness, which is further developed by the transformations and modifications of the circulation process proper.'

²⁶ Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9261.

²⁷ Marx 1976b, p. 164.

abstract, undifferentiated mass – abstract labour – explains the ‘the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour on the basis of commodity production’.²⁸

In a word, the very nature of value production conveys the (false) impression that a system based on a despotic plan has an anarchic content. Many critics of capitalism thus

see the civil war between capitalism and worker not as it is in the labor process . . . [but] rather in the forms which it assumes on the surface, where surplus labor appears as surplus product and hence planlessness. They thereupon contrast the anarchy of the market to the order in the factory. And they present themselves as the *conscious* planners who can bring order also into ‘society,’ that is the market.²⁹

Many of these concepts were clearly developed with the experience of the miners’ general strike in mind. An explicit expression of this was the decision on the part of James, Dunayevskaya and Boggs to hold a theoretical discussion on Marx’s concept of form and plan with rank-and-file workers during the height of the strike. On 15 February 1950, Dunayevskaya gave a lengthy presentation on the development from Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* to *Capital*, arguing that what enabled Marx to grasp the perversity of the commodity-form is that he listened to workers’ revolts and brought a ‘presupposition’ of a concept of ‘freely associated labour’ to bear on his analysis of capitalism. A worker at the meeting said, ‘When you don’t have a notion of future, you just counterpose essence to form; is that what all this means?’ James, speaking in the discussion, stated that ‘We have split the concept of state property. . . . Our function is further to split the concept of the party.’³⁰

Much of the three-way discussion between James, Dunayevskaya and Boggs in 1949–50 also centred on Lenin’s 1914 Hegel Notebooks. At issue for them was not simply that Lenin delved into a serious study of Hegel at the outbreak of World War I, or even that he held that it was impossible to understand Marx’s *Capital* without comprehending the whole of Hegel’s *Logic*. What most drew their attention was that Lenin had spent so much time focusing on ‘The

²⁸ Marx 1976b, p. 169.

²⁹ Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9251.

³⁰ See ‘Discussion on new form of book-in-the-making’ [15 February 1950], in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 1592, 1593.

Doctrine of the Notion', especially its final chapter on 'The Absolute Idea', where the concept of 'the negation of the negation' becomes pivotal. That, too, spoke to issues raised by Marx in such works as his *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, where he argued that the 'communist' negation of private property was merely a first negation; to reach genuine liberation, Marx argued, that negation must itself be negated through the creation of non-alienating relations at work and in man/woman relations.³¹

As James wrote in a letter of May 1949,

For [Lenin in 1914] the core of the dialectic is self-movement through opposition. Good. But that is the core of the dialectic for *him* in 1914. But for *us*, in our world, the core of the dialectic is the materialist interpretation of Hegel's last chapters of the *Logic*, the complete interpenetration of subjective-objective, idealism and materialism.³²

In several letters to James, however, Dunayevskaya noted that she felt Lenin had gone further into Hegel's 'Doctrine of the Notion' than James himself had in his 1948 study *Notes on Dialectics*, which consisted of an extensive discussion of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic*.³³

After the conclusion of the miners' strike in 1950, the JFT concentrated on preparing for what would prove to be its participation in its final SWP Convention, by submitting the document, *State-Capitalism and World Revolution* (written mainly by James, with assistance from Dunayevskaya and Boggs). Several months afterward, the JFT left the SWP and formed a new organisation, Committees of Correspondence. The new group explicitly declared itself free of Trotskyism and proclaimed that it opposed the Leninist concept of the vanguard party.

Yet, it was just when the JFT achieved political independence that differences within the group concerning the relation between spontaneous workers' struggles and a Marxist group began to show themselves. This reared its

³¹ See Marx 1975, pp. 293–305 and pp. 326–46 especially. For a discussion of how Marx's encounter with Hegel's Absolutes impacted the development of his concept of revolution, see Hudis 2000.

³² Letter of C.L.R. James of 20 May 1949, in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 1613. *State-Capitalism and World Revolution*, on the other hand, posed the concept of 'Contradiction' in Hegel's Doctrine of Essence as the crucial category while having little to say on the Doctrine of the Notion. See James 1986.

³³ For Dunayevskaya's letters to James on Lenin's 'Abstract of Hegel's *Science of Logic*' see Dunayevskaya 2002, pp. 343–56. For a further discussion of these issues, see Anderson 1995 and Dunayevskaya 2003.

head when another miners' strike erupted in West Virginia in 1951. The strike was over the demand for seniority rights. At first sight, it may seem that this had little or nothing to do with the continuous miner and automated production. But the opposite is the case. The continuous miner resulted in thousands of lay-offs, which gave new urgency to demands for seniority. As Raymond Inghram, a worker from Morgantown who was part of the JFT put it,

We didn't know at that time that Appalachia would be formed into a depression area from [the lay-offs resulting from the continuous miner]. But people wanted the seniority system to have the right to get off this machine, not to get on it, because they were young people and it was a man-killer. And so the new strike broke out.³⁴

Dunayevskaya held that the strike offered a crucial opportunity for members of Committees of Correspondence to present their ideas to workers and involve them in their plans for issuing a new publication. James, however, sharply opposed the idea, hitting out against what he called 'the proposal to send leaders down there to edit and to organize and generally to lead like SWP leaders'. He insisted,

Our membership and their friends is the only audience I have in mind for the paper. . . . If a mighty bubble broke out, 500,000 miners versus John L. Lewis and shook the coal fields, I would not budge an inch from our program. We could plunge in, spend our money, exhaust ourselves, publish, editorialize, and generally enjoy ourselves, and when it was all over where would we be? Nowhere.³⁵

Dunayevskaya denied she was holding onto the vanguardist approach of the SWP; in her view, she was seeking to follow up on new relations which emerged between the miners and JFT members in 1949–50 itself.

It was not that James was less interested in spontaneous workers' struggles than Dunayevskaya. On the contrary, as became clear from his subsequent work, James placed so much importance on spontaneous workers' struggles that he contended, 'The socialist society [already] exists. We have to record the facts of its existence' in everyday workers' struggles.³⁶ Yet this notion

³⁴ Quoted in Phillips 1984, p. 31.

³⁵ Letter of C.L.R. James of 17 September 1951, in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9315. For a fuller elaboration of this perspective, see James 1980.

³⁶ See James 1968, p. 106.

rested on a different reading of the nature of automation and of proletarian revolt from that developed by Dunayevskaya. As James argued in his 1957 work *Facing Reality*:

Automation is that stage of technology under which capitalism for the first time will not create a need for more manpower regardless of the mass of products produced . . . with automation, capitalism is robbing the majority of the population of the only role they have been permitted.³⁷

Yet despite its human cost, James viewed automation as an essentially *progressive* phenomenon. He wrote:

No worker is against automation as such. He recognizes that automation creates the possibility of such a development of the productive forces that no one anywhere need ever live in want again.³⁸

James went even further, arguing that ‘automation creates the conditions for abolishing all previous distinctions between political and economic control’.³⁹ Automated production, he argued, provides workers with the ‘ability to control only individual machines, but the whole process, method and tempo, by means of which machinery is to be developed and put into use’.⁴⁰ The greater concentration and centralisation of capital involved in automation meant, he argued, that,

[F]rom the very organization of production, the working class, especially in large and highly organized plants, holds its own and on the whole continuously captures positions from management and supervision.⁴¹

On this basis, he insisted that ‘the automation of industry in the United States is creating the actual conditions for a Government of Workers Councils’.⁴² James thus argued that the production relations of modern capitalism will lead workers to assume control of society in quasi-automatic fashion, without the need for their struggles to be mediated by a ‘vanguard party’ or some Marxist organisation of another type.

By the early 1950s, Dunayevskaya also rejected the vanguard party, and she also emphasised the ways in which the contradictions of capitalist

³⁷ James 1968, p. 25.

³⁸ James 1968, p. 26.

³⁹ James 1968, p. 27.

⁴⁰ James 1968, p. 28.

⁴¹ James 1968, p. 29.

⁴² James 1968, p. 27.

production created new possibilities for a socialist transformation of society. But she did not hold that the rise of automation meant that workers would create a new society in quasi-automatic fashion. 'It is not the means of production that create the new type of man,' she wrote, 'but the new type of man that will create the [new] means of production'.⁴³ She was interested in automation not because it produced, *sui generis*, the basis of a non-capitalist society, but because, in revolting *against* automation, workers were raising new questions about the nature of work. But the fact that workers posed *questions* like 'what kind of labour should humanity perform?' did mean that their spontaneous struggles by themselves *answered* them. Marxist theoreticians and organisations were still needed, she argued, to make *explicit* what remains implicit in spontaneous struggles. Otherwise, the creation of a new society could not be assured.

James, in contrast, recoiled from this perspective, as he more and more argued that the mechanism of capitalist production led to spontaneous workers' revolts whose very *form* expressed the content of a socialist society. His attitude toward the relation between capitalist production and workers' revolts determined his increasingly spontaneist approach to matters of organisation. Though differing approaches to the question of organisation on the part of James and Dunayevskaya did not become explicit until the mid-1950s, they were foreshadowed by their disputes over how to respond to the miners' strikes of 1951 especially. As James later put it in a letter to Martin Glaberman in discussing his break from Dunayevskaya in 1955:

You see, the main point in this as in everything is not merely to say what you think is, or what you think ought to be done, but to represent it by your activity and the very way you approach it. That we have lost entirely in the years that preceded our downfall. *A lot of babbling about automation*, speculations as to the condition of the working class, a quite hopeless treatment of what should have been the very essence of our Marxist approach.⁴⁴

One biographer of James sees such disputes as central to the break-up of the Johnson-Forest Tendency. Farrukh Dhondy writes,

⁴³ See 'Random Thoughts on the New Mode of Production', in Dunayevskaya 1988, microfilm no. 12500. Though it lacks a specific date, the document was written at the times of the miners' strikes in 1949–51.

⁴⁴ 'Letters on Organization', in James 1999, p. 74, emphasis added.

Dunayevskaya, while having gone along with the theory . . . couldn't see herself functioning without an organization even if it wasn't called the Vanguard Party. She was of the opinion that if you were a revolutionary you had to do something; James' increasingly rigorous point of view seemed to be in favor of doing nothing except observing what the people themselves did and describing its revolutionary potential. . . . What the conflict boiled down to was, what was the organization of revolutionaries to do?⁴⁵

Dhondy has hit upon an important point. As James later stated, 'The party formula has been exhausted, it can't work any longer, something new has to take its place, what exactly we don't know yet'.⁴⁶ In fact, James never seems to have determined what the role of a grouping of Marxists who have broken with the concept of the vanguard party might be. It is not that he questioned the need for Marxist theory in general or his own role as a revolutionary in particular. But he never specified the *relationship* between spontaneous mass activity and revolutionary theory once the concept of the vanguard party has been jettisoned.⁴⁷

As James wrote in 1963:

It is absolutely clear to me now that [the Marxist] is not so much concerned with educating the masses, the masses don't need any education at all, absolutely none. The Marxist organization and the rest of them have to educate themselves.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Dhondy, pp. 131–2. Dhondy's book is nonetheless replete with factual errors regarding James's sojourn in the US. He says James's essay 'Marxism and the Intellectuals' is 'a subtly stated attack on Dunayevskaya's position'; it could not have been that, however, since the essay was written in 1962, seven years after James and Dunayevskaya had parted company. The essay is instead a response to Grace Lee Boggs's break from James, in 1962. For a discussion of the reasons for the break between Boggs and James, see Boggs 2002. Dhondy also errs in claiming that the dispute between James and Dunayevskaya centred on James's dismissal of Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind* in his *Notes on Dialectics*. In fact, James did not discuss that work one way or the other in his *Notes* and neither did Dunayevskaya at the time (1948). Dunayevskaya first took issue with James for failing to explore Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind* in her 1953 'Letters on Hegel's Absolutes'. See Dunayevskaya 2002, pp. 6–8, 24–30.

⁴⁶ 'Perspectives and Proposals', in James 1999, p. 157.

⁴⁷ Nevertheless, this did not stop James from holding to a rather traditional view of forms of organisation, as seen in his attack on Rosa Luxemburg's critique of Lenin's centralism: 'She believed Lenin's emphasis on centralism and the role of the party was reactionary. She was entirely wrong. . . . I believe that it is necessary for somebody to put forward a system, a centralized procedure.' See James 1999, pp. 174, 177. For a more favourable view of Luxemburg's critique of Lenin, see Dunayevskaya 1991.

⁴⁸ James 1999, p. 169.

But that only begs the question of what this Marxist organisation is supposed to *do* with the 'education' it has gained. Though James stressed the importance of both spontaneous self-activity and revolutionary theory, the *relationship* between the two was left undetermined.

Dunayevskaya was already headed in a different direction by 1951, in that she was reaching for a new relation between mass self-activity and revolutionary theory. The experience of the miners' strikes, where workers asked such questions as what *kind* of labour should humanity perform, proved to her how erroneous was the claim that workers can attain only trade-union consciousness through their self-activity. But is Marxist theory only for the edification of intellectuals, or is it needed for workers to make sense of the *meaning* of their own actions so that they can develop its ramifications to its ultimate revolutionary conclusion? Is the role of a Marxist organisation limited to recording workers' actions, or does it not also have something to contribute in the way of ideas – especially the idea of a totally new society?

These questions became the focus of a series of letters on Hegel's Absolutes that Dunayevskaya sent James in May 1953. She wrote,

I am not concerned with spontaneity versus organization, nor with Stalinism which the workers will overcome. I am concerned only with the dialectic . . . of that type of grouping like ours, be it large or small, and its relationship to the mass.⁴⁹

As she later put it, when looking back on these 1953 letters, which became the philosophical moment for her development of Marxist humanism,

I wasn't interested either in the mass party, which the masses will build, or in the elitist party, which we definitely oppose, but in what happens to a small group 'like us' who know that nothing can be done without the masses, and are with them, but [such groups of] theoreticians always seem to be around too. So what is the *objectivity* which explains their presence, as the objectivity explains the spontaneous outburst of the masses? In a word, I was looking for the objectivity of subjectivity.⁵⁰

James never responded to Dunayevskaya's 1953 'Letters on Hegel's Absolutes'. Nor did he ever return to a serious study of Hegel in the years following the

⁴⁹ 'Letters on Hegel's Absolutes of May 12 and May 20, 1953', in Dunayevskaya 2002, pp. 15–34.

⁵⁰ 'Presentation on the Dialectics of Organization and Philosophy' [1 June 1987], in Dunayevskaya 2002, pp. 3–14.

break-up of the Johnson-Forest Tendency in 1955, despite his earlier stated view (in *Notes on Dialectics*) that 'We have to get hold of the Notion, of the Absolute Idea, before we can see this relation between organization and spontaneity in its concrete truth'.⁵¹

In founding News and Letters Committees in 1955, Dunayevskaya wrote:

Although the leaders of the state capitalist tendency had been saying for years that we live in an age of absolutes, that the task of the theoreticians was the working out materialistically of Hegel's last chapter on the Absolute Idea, we were unable to relate the daily struggles of the workers to this total conception. The maturity of our age, on the other hand, disclosed itself in the fact that, with automation, the workers began to question the very mode of labor. Thus they began to make concrete, *and thereby extended*, Marx's profoundest conceptions . . . What was new was that there was a movement (a dialectic) not alone in the development from theory to practice, but *from practice to theory*.⁵²

Meeting this movement from practice with a philosophy of revolution, she held, defined the 'historic right to exist' of a Marxist tendency.

V. Philosophy and organisation

Though a new conception of the relation of spontaneity to organisation and to philosophy opposed to the concept of the vanguard party began to emerge on the part of Dunayevskaya and others as a result of the experience of the miners' strikes of 1949–51, its significance has for too long remained hidden from history. There are two basic reasons for this. One reason is that the discussions and debates in the JFT took place in a small organisation that did not directly impact the wider labour movement. Though a number of miners participated in the discussions initiated by the JFT in the 1950s, which in turn influenced a number of rank-and-file labour activists in ensuing years, Dunayevskaya and her colleagues did not exert any measurable influence on the politics of the UMWA or the miners' struggle as a whole.⁵³ The second

⁵¹ See James 1980, p. 119.

⁵² 'Introduction to *Philosophic Notes*', in Dunayevskaya 1992.

⁵³ See especially Martin 2001. Dunayevskaya's effort to project the need for a new relation between philosophy and decentralised forms of organisation later obtained a larger hearing within the women's liberation movement. For an important indication of this, see Rich 2001.

reason flows from the outcome of the strikes of 1949–51. As mentioned earlier, in exchange for ending the strike, the coal operators gave Lewis an industry-wide contract in the form of the National Bituminous Coal Wage Agreement of 1950. A long period of relative labour peace descended upon the coal industry, as Lewis and the operators worked out subsequent contracts through secret negotiations. Rank-and-file discontent continued to show itself, as seen in the 170 wildcat strikes that broke out in the coal fields in 1956 alone.⁵⁴ Yet the sharp decline in the number of miners, the massive unemployment in the mining region, and the firm authoritarian control exerted by Lewis over the union enabled him to impose an era of relative harmony between the union leadership and management that lasted for two decades. As one study put it,

The industry, which had experienced strikes in contract negotiations on the average of once every 18 months in the previous 13 years, was not to experience a single such strike in the 13 years following 1951.⁵⁵

The outcome of the strikes of 1949–51 therefore appears to signal for some not a new stage of workers' consciousness and subjectivity but rather one of accommodation between union and management. This helps explain why the miners' strikes of 1949–51 have so rarely been taken up by radical historians and theorists, whether of the vanguardist or autonomist variety. The process becomes lost in the product. The inner strivings of workers battling automation becomes subsumed by the 'harmony' established between capital and the union leadership. Those who stay on the surface level of phenomena and fail to discern the dialectic that operates beneath the interplay between established interests, thus fail to even notice a key moment in the emergence of a new expression of proletarian subjectivity.

The reason it becomes so important to penetrate this false appearance today is that the questions that emerged in these first massive wildcat strikes against automated production reverberate with some of the central issues of our life and times. Over the past several decades, the focal point of innumerable forces of revolt has been the effort to challenge and transform the conditions of labour and human relations as a whole. As long as capitalism remains with us, there is no doubt that the battle to redress the inequities in the distribution of value will persist. But, in light of the failure of so much of the

⁵⁴ Denby 1960, p. 46.

⁵⁵ Perry 1984, p. 188.

traditional labour and socialist movement to project a truly revolutionary alternative, the effort to raise deeper questions concerning the nature of work, the very existence of value production, and the alienated character of human relations as a whole have gained greater and greater urgency. In this sense, the struggles of American workers have been at the forefront of some of the crucial questions which face masses of people around the world today as they confront the dehumanised conditions of high-tech globalised capitalism.

This makes it even more essential that we not only recognise and record the history of these important labour struggles, but that we also work out what remains an unresolved problem in the history of post-Marx Marxism – the relationship between the Reason contained in spontaneous mass struggles⁵⁶ and the role that can be played by a grouping of non-vanguardist revolutionaries who seek to build upon it as the path to a new society. James's spontaneist position, as well as similar ones developed by such tendencies as *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in the 1950s and 1960s, remain influential today, largely because they seem to provide an alternative to élitist and hierarchical forms of revolutionary organisation.⁵⁷ At the same time, the problems such tendencies have confronted in projecting a *positive* alternative to the vanguard party form of organisation by specifying the 'historic reason to exist' of a tendency of Marxist theoreticians that exists independently of spontaneous struggles makes it all the more important to rethink the history of the American labour movement as part of working out a new relation of theory and practice. As Dunayevskaya put it in 1959, a few years after her break with James:

So rich are the traditions of America, so uninhibited are the American workers by the preconceived notions of leaders, including those from their

⁵⁶ The phrase 'workers as reason' originally derives from a comment made by Lenin in describing the formation of the soviets during the 1905 Russian Revolution: 'The sense and reason of millions of downtrodden people is awakening, not only for reading books, but for action, for living human action, for historical creativeness'. See Lenin 1943, p. 261. Dunayevskaya often used the concept of 'masses as reason' to emphasise the consciousness and creativity found in spontaneous freedom struggles, in contrast to the instrumentalist rationality of bourgeois society.

⁵⁷ James's emphasis on spontaneity can be seen as having influenced a number of currents in autonomist Marxism, including Negri and Hardt. At the same time, in regard to the problem of organisation, they seem not to have gone beyond his stopping point, as seen from the conclusion of *Empire*: 'The *only* event that we are still awaiting is the construction, or rather the insurgence, of a powerful organization. . . . We do not have any models to offer for this event. *Only* the multitude through its practical experimentation will offer the models and determine when and how the possible becomes real' [my emphasis]. See Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 411.

own labor ranks, that a new Humanism is evolving. They have no Labor Party to 'lead' them or mislead them – and they have no awe of intellectuals like the French Existentialists. That does not mean they reject theory. On the contrary. There is a movement from practice to theory that is literally begging for a movement from theory to practice to meet it. When these two finally do meet – and I have no doubt of their meeting – it cannot be anything short of a New Humanism.⁵⁸

This was the core of the concept of Marxist humanism that she was to develop from the 1950s onward.

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