

Overcoming Some Current Challenges to Dialectical Thought

Kevin Anderson

August 18, 2010

A report from the successfully concluded Founding Conference of the International Marxist-Humanist Organization, Chicago, July 3-4, 2010

The views set out in our Statement of Principles and our commitment to the dialectics of revolution place us in conflict with the dominant philosophical perspectives, even on the Left. Two of these dominant perspectives on the Left are: (1) the tradition of democracy and civil society that emerged in the 1980s as a rejection of revolution and of Marxism and with which are associated thinkers like Jürgen Habermas; (2) the traditions of autonomous Marxism and postcolonialism, which are associated with thinkers like Antonio Negri and Edward Said. The first of these trends is influential in the mass democratic movement in Iran today, while the second is influential in the anti-globalization movement. — Editors

I. Introduction: The Philosophical, the Political, and the Organizational

We gather here this weekend to found the International Marxist-Humanist Organization. This action is unprecedented in the history of the Left. We are committed to working out philosophically and putting into practice a real alternative to this moribund capitalist system whose stench has become unbearable, whether that coming from the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, from the killing fields of Afghanistan and Iraq, or from the torture chambers of Iran. And we are committed to doing so as an international organization with a unified set of philosophical, political, and organizational principles, rooted in the writings and organizational practice of our founder, Raya Dunayevskaya.

Philosophically, as our Statement of Principles sets forth, “we base ourselves on the totality of Marx’s Marxism, 1841-1883. In particular, we stand on the philosophical new beginnings articulated in Marx’s 1844 Humanist Essays, especially the ‘dialectic of negativity as a moving and creating principle’.” This type of grounding in the whole of

Marx's thought, including the 1844 Humanist Essays, might sound self-evident to us, but virtually no other socialist organizations anywhere would take such a position. And as we know, Marx's statement praising the "dialectic of negativity" is a tribute to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and in that sense, we are Hegelian Marxists as well as Marxist-Humanists. This is what we are philosophically, but the Statement of Principles goes on to concretize this further in terms of what we are not: "Alternatives such as post-modernist thought and pragmatism cannot fundamentally challenge the realities of globalised capitalism. But an adequate response to these alternatives cannot be based on forms of post-Marx Marxism that allow particularity and difference to be skipped over or ignored. New human relations, what Marx first called a new Humanism, can be achieved when we restate, develop, and concretise Marx's Marxism for our time as a dialectical, critical concept of 'revolution in permanence.' That creative dialectic needs to spell out what we are for, and our positive humanist vision, rather than the mere rejection of the present capitalist order, a rejection that lacks such a dialectical 'positive in the negative'." [For the full text of our Statement of Principles, see, <http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/announcements/announcing-a-new-formation-the-international-marxist-humanist-organization>]

Politically, we have firmly opposed capitalism in its various forms, whether private or state, while also supporting a whole range of emancipatory movements. In our Principles, we write: "We oppose this capitalist, racist, sexist, heterosexist, and class-based society. We strive to foster the firmest unity among the forces of revolution and opposition to the established order: rank-and-file workers; oppressed nationalities and ethnic groups; women; lesbian-bisexual-gay-transgender people; students and youth; all of those people who are deeply disaffected and alienated from the established order who realize that a revolutionary transformation of society is necessary to create a truly human world." We do so even when those go against the grain of the established Left. The IMHO Principles give specific examples that help define us further, again showing what we are by pointing to what we are not: "We also oppose reactionary forms of anti-imperialism whether based in religious fundamentalism, narrow nationalism, or military-populism. We opposed the first Iraq War of 1991 while at the same time supported the freedom movement of the Kurdish people. During the 1990s, we supported Bosnia-Herzegovina's struggle for a multiethnic society in the face of Serbian genocide, the struggle of Chiapas in the face of globalised capitalism, and the independence movements of Kosova and Aceh. Since the September 11, 2001 attacks we have opposed the U.S. doctrine of permanent war while supporting both the antiwar movement and the freedom struggles of Iraqi, Iranian and Afghan women. We have supported the Palestinian national liberation movement while

also supporting Israel's right to exist within the pre-June 1967 borders, and at the same time opposing and exposing all forms of religious fundamentalism and narrow nationalism.”

Organizationally, we stand for the unity of philosophy and organization at all times, here following the pathway laid down by Dunayevskaya, the founder of Marxist-Humanism in the U.S. After referring to her major writings and their core themes, our Principles state: “Dunayevskaya’s 1953 Letters on Hegel’s Absolutes and her notes for an unfinished book on Dialectics of Organization and Philosophy (1986-87) offer crucial direction for organisation today. In looking at the history of revolutions and revolutionary movements, Dunayevskaya critiqued the limitations of both the vanguard party and the spontaneous forms emerging from below. She also pointed to the inadequacy of a committee form of organisation, which has not been able to transcend the limitations of the vanguard party as long as it has remained separated from dialectical philosophy.” Here again, examples of what we are against will offer some clarification of what we are. On the one hand, we have rejected those who have turned Marxist-Humanism into an eclecticism that hides its failure to concretize Marxism for our times behind incantatory quotes from Dunayevskaya. On the other hand, we have rejected the attempt to ground a viable Marxist-Humanist organization in an ever-narrower set of formalistic rules about organizational structure that crowds out the philosophical-political grounding necessary to any serious Marxist organization. [For more discussion on these latter points see Peter Hudis, “[Towards an Organizational History of the Philosophy of Marxist-Humanism in the U.S.](#)” (2009)]

Our attempt to work this all out in practice, both the practice of activism and the practice of philosophical-political discussion and creation, is an audacious challenge to a world where, even on the Left, the type of dialectics of revolution we espouse is often rejected, and where the type of dialectics of organization and philosophy we are working out is often off the agenda completely. Today I want to underline some of the challenges to our form of dialectics of revolution, particularly those coming from two different philosophical directions: (1) the tradition of democracy and civil society that emerged in the 1980s as a rejection of revolution and of Marxism and with which are associated thinkers like Jürgen Habermas; (2) the traditions of autonomous Marxism and postcolonialism, which are associated with thinkers like Edward Said and Antonio Negri. The first of these trends is influential in the mass democratic movement in Iran today, while the second is influential in the anti-globalization movement.

II. Habermas, Iran and the “Self-Limiting Revolution”

In the 1980s, under the impetus of the failed revolutionary movements of the 1960s, the growth of the Green parties in Western Europe, and the emergence of the Solidarnosc labor union in Poland, prominent former Marxists like the German critical theorist Jürgen Habermas began to attack Marxism and specifically Marxist humanism as a utopian philosophy that leads, at best, toward misguided and impractical politics, and at worst, toward totalitarianism. The Polish philosopher and former Marxist humanist Leszek Kolakowski termed this Marx's Promethean humanism, which he did not mean as a compliment: "The Promethean idea which recurs constantly in Marx's work is that of faith in man's unlimited powers as self-creator... and the belief that the man of tomorrow will derive his 'poetry' from the future" (*Main Currents of Marxism*, Vol. I, p. 412). The Habermasian philosopher Albrecht Wellmer, who in an earlier period carried on a dialogue with Dunayevskaya, issued a virulent attack on Marxist-Humanism that tapped into a similar conceptual universe: "So-called Marxist Humanism allowed no separation from the utopian horizons of Marxist theory and practice... There is an internal relation between the utopian horizon of Marxist theory and the repressive practice of actually existing [Stalinist] socialism" (*Endspiele*, 1993, p. 82)

This kind of thinking is diametrically opposed to our critique of Stalinist totalitarianism, which Dunayevskaya theorized as a technocratic state-capitalism that pushed aside the human person in a relentless quest for capital accumulation and rapid industrialization no matter what the cost.

Ideas have consequences. As Dunayevskaya underlined, they not only respond to mass movements from below, but they also help to shape them. We know the result in this case: During the decade of the 1980s, and under the relentless pressure of a mass workers movement and the critical intellectuals allied with it, the Polish Stalinist system finally gave way. The intellectuals who provided philosophical and political guidance to the labor resistance had by then concluded that one must give up the idea of revolution and instead embrace incremental change, or as it was called in Poland in the 1980s, a self-limiting revolution. This meant that one should assist in the formation a social movement, in this case a labor movement, but not attempt to overthrow state power. The end result was a Western-style privatized capitalism that promptly laid off most of the shipyard workers who had been the backbone of the democratic movement.

During the past 15 years, Iran has been in constant turmoil, as Islamic reformists, feminists, students, and workers have challenged the repressive theocracy. In addition, in a society where philosophy looms large in the general culture, a number of more-or-less secular philosophical currents rooted in various schools, from Habermas to Hegel to

Popperian scientific positivism — and occasionally, forms of independent Marxism including Marxist-Humanism as well — have interacted with currents of opposition. During the period 1997-2005, when Iran experienced a cultural opening, it was no coincidence that of the prominent Western philosophers who came to speak in Tehran, it was Habermas who drew the largest audience when he spoke at Tehran University in 2002. Thus, it was not inappropriate for Danny Postel to refer to one of Habermas's famous works in the title of his book, *Reading Legitimation Crisis in Tehran* (2006). To be sure, either Habermasian critical theory or Popperian liberalism, with their evocation of critical reason, at least give intellectuals and youth some tools with which to challenge clerical dogmatism. But they do not offer grounds for the type of revolutionary change that is needed today in Iran, or the world, for that matter.

The possibility of a revolution against the clerical regime in Iran burst out into the open in June 2009, with the mass democratic movement that began as a protest against the blatantly rigged re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. From the beginning we supported this movement, while also doing battle with those on the Left in the West who minimized this movement or worse, attacked it as playing into the hands of imperialism. I won't waste any time on the likes of them today.

[In our June 19, 2009 "Preliminary Statement on the Upheaval in Iran," issued by both the U.S. Marxist-Humanists and the Hobgoblin group in London, we stated: "As Marxist-Humanists, we urge anti-capitalists the world over to solidarize with the Iranian people in their hour of struggle. Support the Iranian youth, women, workers, and other citizens in their freedom struggles! Do not be taken in by the reactionary anti-imperialism of Ahmadinejad and Khamenei!" <http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/articles/preliminary-statement-on-the-upheaval-in-iran/>]

[In our September 18, 2009 statement "Support the Iranian People's Movement against the Repressive Regime!" issued by the U.S. Marxist-Humanists, the Hobgoblin group in London, and Marxist-Humanists in Canada, India, and West Africa, we stated:

"Unfortunately, some parts of the global Left have betrayed the Iranian people in their hour of need by supporting Ahmadinejad, among them Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and the Marxist journal *Monthly Review*. These leftists claim that since the regime is resisting Western imperialism, it is deserving of our support. They have also dismissed the mass actions of Iran's youth, women, workers, and intellectuals as an isolated middle class movement. We condemn these falsehoods that serve to mask the oppressive and exploitative reality of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

<http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/articles/support-the-iranian-peoples-movement-against-the-repressive-regime/>

What I would like to do is to flesh out a bit what we mean when we say that our stance toward the Iranian democratic movement – the largest and most sustained progressive mass movement anywhere in the world today, and one in which feminists have played the most prominent role ever in such a movement – is nonetheless one of critical rather than uncritical support. To be sure, we salute the movement, whose members and leaders are undergoing horrific executions and torture even now. And although the top leadership has not (yet) been arrested, they have suffered severely nonetheless, with a nephew of Mir Hussein Moussavi having been murdered by regime thugs, and a son of Mehdi Karroubi having been severely tortured.

It should be noted, however, that there is no evidence that the present leadership of the democratic movement in Iran has the intention, let alone the organization necessary to topple the regime. Its top leaders, even the very outspoken and intransigent Mehdi Karroubi, make clear that they wish to stay within the bounds of the structures of the Islamic Republic and to reform those structures, not to overthrow them. Karroubi has made clear not only that he does not want a revolution, but also that he does not even want a general strike to support the demands of the protestors. This was shown in a rare interview with him in September 2009:

“He ruled out as unwise more extreme actions such as general strikes. ‘Common people would suffer at the end of the day,’ he said. ‘Our disputes are not so deep. It is a dispute between members of a family. So we do not need that scale of protest’” (Ramin Mostaghim and Borzou Daragahi, “Key Opposition Figure Stands His Ground in Iran,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2009,

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-iran-karroubi9-2009sep09,0,6445751.story>)

To many supporters of the democratic movement, including a number of critical philosophers, this is not a problem, since they have defined the movement not as a revolution but a civil rights struggle. In so doing, they have continued the type of perspective rooted in thinkers like Habermas or Popper that they have been developing since the 1990s.

During past revolutionary situations, establishment figures like Karroubi would, as expected, usually opt for reform rather than revolution. But especially in a country like Iran, the question of what happens after the revolution is hardly an abstraction today. For

this is a country that directly experienced a major revolution in 1978-79. The revolutionaries took power, but instead of liberating society from oppression, the subsequent victory of the clerics over the Left meant that Iran was transformed into an authoritarian theocracy. This has meant that even radical youth on the street battling the regime's forces in 2009 were leery of the word "revolution." As a student protestor told Western reporters last summer: "We don't want a revolution. We already had one of those and it didn't work" (Robert F. Worth and Nazila Fathi, "Crackdown 'Immoral,' Opposition Says in Iran," *New York Times*, 7/26/09 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/26/world/middleeast/26iran.html?scp=1&sq=&st=nyt>).

This is the paradox and the tragedy of Iran today. It desperately needs a revolution to transform the Islamic Republic, since the regime leadership has not given way and has met the democratic movement with little but repression. Moreover, a revolutionary situation, or something near to that, was in existence for much of 2009. At the same time, however, the very idea of revolution is so discredited – in no small part due to recent philosophical debates — that this rejection of revolution weighs down the movement, preventing it from taking things to a conclusion.

All of this gives a new meaning to Dunayevskaya's assertion in 1953 that Lenin "didn't have Stalinism to overcome, when revolutions, transitions seemed sufficient to bring the new society. Now everyone looks at the totalitarian one-party state, *that* is the new that must be overcome by a totally new revolt in which everyone *experiences* 'absolute liberation'" ("Letters on Hegel's Absolutes," in *The Power of Negativity*, 2002, p. 22).

But is such "absolute liberation" a real possibility? According to the popular critical philosophers of today like Habermas, such attempts at "absolute liberation" are themselves the problem. The hegemony of such philosophies has added a powerful new conceptual barrier to the needed Iranian revolution.

III. The Lure of Foucault: Said, Negri, and the Dialectic

If the Habermasians criticize Marx for being too radical, for a Promethean humanism that seeks to fly too high, many other radical thinkers of today attack Marx from a different direction. In these quarters it is said that the problem with Marx is not that he was too radical, but that he was not radical enough. Some add that the truly radical thinkers are people like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, even Friedrich Nietzsche. These critics – most famously the Palestinian literary theorist Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (1978) – have attacked Marx for adopting what they see as a unilinear model of development in the modernist mode. (Postmodernists term this a grand narrative.) Here, much of the debate

has revolved around Marx's early articles on India during the early 1850s. At a general level, it is said even more often among radical intellectuals today that Marx informs us on class and economic structures but that his theoretical model does not incorporate gender, race, ethnicity, or nationalism at all, or at least not very much.

Said wrote over three decades ago in his *Orientalism* that Marx in his 1853 writings on India held to the "ideal of regenerating a fundamentally lifeless Asia" by way of British colonialism (p. 154). At first, Said continues, "Marx was still able to identify even a little with poor Asia" but this sentiment "disappeared as it encountered the unshakable definitions built up by Orientalist science" (p. 155). Said concludes that "in article after article he returned *with increasing conviction* to the idea that even in destroying Asia, Britain was making possible there a real social revolution" (1978, p. 153, emphasis added).

To be sure, there are elements of Eurocentrism and even ethnocentrism in Marx's 1853 writings on India. But can we really agree with Said's blanket denunciation of Marx and all European thought concerning the Middle East and Asia? "It is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric" (p. 204). Said's argument about "every European... a racist" is nothing short of the most crass cultural nationalism dressed up in sophisticated postmodernist language. As the Indian Marxist Aijaz Ahmad writes, "only the most obscurantist indigenists and cultural nationalists had previously argued... that Europeans were ontologically incapable of producing any true knowledge about non-Europe. But Said was emphatic on this point" (*In Theory*, pp. 178-79).

Said's blanket dismissal ignores Marx's denunciations of British colonialism as a form of barbarism and his evocation of an independent India, already in 1853. It ignores his firm support for the anti-British Sepoy Uprising four years later, when he termed the Indian people his "best allies" in the struggle against capital. It ignores his overturning of the Eurocentric theory of 3 stages of precapitalist society – the primitive, slave, and feudal modes of production – in the *Grundrisse* (1857-58), by inserting alongside them an "Asiatic" mode of production. And it ignores Marx's late writings on British colonialism and Indian resistance, by then seen as rooted in indigenous social structures in the villages.

I will not go into all this here, as you can read it in my *Marx at the Margins*. But I will say that I think we have to confront these kinds of attacks on Marx head on, and answer them point-by-point, while also acknowledging that Marx's writings on Asia were occasionally flawed. Above all, we should not retreat behind generalities like supporting Marx's method only, while adding that he was a man of the nineteenth century, etc. To

the contrary! Developing Marxism for our time means confronting the whole of Marx's work and re-examining it with the eyes of today in search of new points of departure, not for his sake but for ours.

One of the sources of Said's flawed conceptualization of Marx, and ultimately of colonialism and racism as well, is his having rooted *Orientalism* in Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. Foucault rejected modern Western bureaucratic forms of power so vehemently that he refused to see any progress resulting from the liberal revolutions of the eighteenth century. In terms of the subsequent leftist opposition to the new capitalist order, he saw not only the trade union and socialist leaders from the nineteenth century onward as part of the system, but also the proletariat itself. Where Marx and Lenin wrote about going "lower and deeper" to the rank-and-file workers, Foucault saw the entire working class as co-opted by the system. He saw real resistance as coming from more marginalized groups like criminals, mental patients, and sexual minorities. Outside the West, although Said did not join him in this, Foucault came to support radical Islamism as a more powerful challenge to global power systems than Marxism, which he judged to be just another Western modernizing ideology.

Another Foucauldian notion – which Said incorporates only partially – is the idea that power is connected to a set of ideas and that it expresses itself not only from the top down – from the state, capital, or the police – but also from within subordinate groups as well. As he wrote famously: "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors,' it 'abstracts,' it 'masks,' it 'conceals.' In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (*Discipline and Punish*, p. 194). This is directed in part against the Marxist concept of ideology, where ideology masks and justifies power and repression. It also runs against Marx's concept of alienation, for those subordinate here are not so much alienated as absorbed into the matrix of power. What Said takes from all of this is the notion of "domains of objects and rituals of truth," Foucault's notion that a major aspect of the workings of power is that it creates new notions of truth and knowledge. To Said, Western "Orientalist" writing on the Middle East and Asia, which he saw as consistently in the service of imperialism, was an example of such a formation of truth and knowledge tied to a power grid.

Said also writes that Orientalism – whether as scholarship or as literary writings — not only reflected imperialist sensibilities, but also was a major cause of imperialism itself. Thus, in passages that would startle a historical materialist or even many Foucauldians, Said sees European racism and ethnocentrism toward the East as transhistorical and fixed

structures. Thus, he credits the French Romantic novelist Chateaubriand with creating the intellectual ground for French conquests in Algeria decades later and he goes back even earlier – to the Italian Renaissance writer Dante in the 14th century! – for the basis of what he erroneously sees as an unremitting and unchanging European cultural hostility toward Islam. (And this even though Dante had placed great Muslim philosophers like Averroes in an honored position alongside Plato and Aristotle!)

The other side of Foucault’s notion of power quoted above — the notion that “we must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms” – is crucial to another philosophy of today that is also rooted in Foucault, the autonomist Marxism of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Where Said’s work has had more of an academic influence, that of Negri and Hardt can be found throughout the activist communities that identify with anarchism or autonomist Marxism. In New York last March at the Left Forum, one striking thing about the literature tables as opposed to a decade ago was the relative absence of vanguardist parties and the proliferation of autonomist and anarchist tables, with many of the latter carrying writings by Negri.

To his credit, Negri has helped to move a whole generation involved in the anti-globalization movement back toward Marx and away from some of the excesses of anarchism and postmodernism. In *Empire*, published a decade ago, Hardt and Negri rightly point out that many forms of identity politics – including those of Edward Said — have been absorbed into global capitalism as part of its ideology. They also express a healthy hostility toward statist communism and the vanguard party, while supporting various grassroots movements. In addition, they point again and again to the relevance of Marx’s work, particularly the *Grundrisse*, to the analysis of contemporary capitalist reality.

But at the same time, Hardt and Negri’s concept of modern society and of the resistance to it is deeply Foucauldian and therefore mired in the politics of difference. They write at one point: “Consider the most powerful and radical struggles of the final years of the twentieth century: The Tiananmen Square events in 1989, the Intifada against Israeli state authority, the May 1992 revolt in Los Angeles, the uprising in Chiapas that began in 1994, and the series of strikes that paralyzed France in 1995 and those that crippled South Korea in 1996” (*Empire*, p. 54). To Hardt and Negri, these struggles were not commensurate and “could in no respect be linked together as a globally expanding chain of revolt” (p. 54).

As Marxist-Humanists, we would tend to see more commonalities among these six struggles than that. Certainly Korea and France were new types of labor struggles in developed capitalist lands, while the Intifada, Chiapas, and Los Angeles each had anti-

colonial or anti-racist dimensions, while China represented a post-revolutionary democratic and labor struggle against an entrenched state-capitalist system calling itself communist. And to the extent that we did not see these movements speaking to each other, we would point to that lack as a problem that could be overcome, in no small part with the aid of a Marxist-Humanist philosophy of liberation that would help us both to appreciate the creative newness of each of these movements and to develop dialectical critiques of their shortcomings. Without such a dialectical unity among various forces of revolution in both developed and less developed capitalist societies, a really global struggle against capital and against the modern state could not emerge, and only such a global struggle rooted in a philosophy of liberation had a real chance to overcome the capitalist order.

Had Negri and Hardt stopped at the incommensurability of these six struggles, they would be nothing more than another example of the politics of difference. But they go on to generalize about them in their own way, albeit very abstractly. Each of these struggles, they write, carries with it the possibility of a global challenge to the power system. This is because they subscribe, in Foucauldian fashion, to the notion quoted above to the effect that power is everywhere and nowhere, and that therefore it need not be resisted only at its pinnacle. Instead, we can throw down the gauntlet of resistance at any point because power expresses itself both from above and below. (They root all of this in Foucault's concept of biopower from the *History of Sexuality*, which I do not have space to go into here.)

It is not a very big leap from there to write, as Hardt and Negri do, that a global multitude of the powerless is now in place as a web of resistance to capital, and that, in fact, it has already achieved numerous victories. This multitude – and not state policies from on high – is credited with destroying the old national and welfare state capitalisms that characterized the post-World War II liberal consensus. The multitude is also credited with the possibility of bringing about a global emancipation from capitalism, without organization, without a unified philosophy, without even any real communication between its various sectors.

This gaping flaw in *Empire* is rooted in the type of philosophical outlook they have embraced, one that radically rejects all forms of what they term transcendence in favor of staying on the plane of immanence, i.e., taking elements within the given social reality as one's point of departure. We are a long way from Simone de Beauvoir's plea at the end of *The Second Sex* for women to cease to limit themselves to the world of immanence and to go forth into that of transcendence as well, an equally one-sided perspective that called

upon men's intervention rather than women's own self-activity to initiate women's liberation.

But we do not have to choose between such one-sided alternatives. Consider Hegel's standpoint, as summed up by the Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School: "To insist on the choice between immanence and transcendence is to revert to the traditional logic criticized in Hegel's polemic against Kant" (Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 31). In fact, Hardt and Negri regularly attack Hegel and the Enlightenment philosophers as conservative and authoritarian, while extolling pre-Enlightenment republican traditions rooted in Machiavelli and Spinoza. What they thereby cut themselves off from is the dialectical notion that a liberated future can emerge from within the present, if the various forces and tendencies that oppose the system can link up in turn with an theory of liberation that sketches out philosophically that emancipatory future for which they yearn.

Marx certainly overcame the pre-Hegelian split between immanence and transcendence. The working class did not exist before capitalism and was a product of the new capitalist order, and was therefore immanent or internal to capitalism. At the same time, however, the alienated and exploited working class fought against capital, not only for a bigger piece of the pie, but also engaged in a struggle to overcome capitalism itself, and was in this sense a force for transcendence (the future in the present).

At this point, my brief philosophical investigation of current challenges to dialectical and revolutionary thought has come full circle. As with Habermas and the civil society/democracy tendencies, and here despite all their political differences with Hardt and Negri, one philosophical theme is common to both, a rejection of all forms of radical transcendence. Above all, there is a deep hostility toward any notion of conceptualizing dialectically an alternative to capitalism. In the case of the Habermasians, doing so is simply a dangerous utopianism that seduces us away from a needed pragmatic approach toward change. In the case of Hardt and Negri, conceptualizing in a dialectical fashion feeds ultimately into authoritarianism and colonial hubris. Machiavelli, with his harshly "realist" pre-Enlightenment, pre-Hegelian view of human capacities – and his explicit rejection of "imagined republics," i.e. the ancient Greek philosophical tradition — is said to offer a better perspective for today. To Hardt and Negri, while we need to take up Marx's critique of capital and his class analysis in modified form, above all we need to keep clear of Marx's humanism, and especially that humanism's expansive, Promethean side that points toward transcendence of the given.

To conclude, let me say that each of the schools of thought considered here offer serious challenges to revolutionary dialectics in the Marxist-Humanist sense. None of them are

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

absurd on their face and each of them appeals to deeply held experiences and intellectual ferments over past decades. Habermas and the civil society people are responding to the failure of twentieth century revolutions to create new human societies, and have bounced back toward reformist liberalism. Said and postcolonial theory have adopted a politics of difference in response to the deep racism that persists in Western societies even after the Civil Rights movements and the anti-colonial revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s. And Hardt and Negri are – albeit too abstractly and schematically – attempting to get Marxism into a dialogue with poststructuralism and other contemporary forms of radical philosophy in order to overcome the politics of difference that has paralyzed the left for the past three decades.

What can we do as Marxist-Humanists? First, I think we have to stare negativity in the face, as old Hegel liked to say. We have to realize what we are up against. We have to realize that we are moving against some powerful currents – even on the Left – when we put forth our form of revolutionary dialectics. Second, we have to realize that each of these three trends has reached an impasse, which will open up some of their followers to our point of view. Habermasians have become very pessimistic about the growth of authoritarianism and racism in Western liberal democracies and see no way out. Postcolonialists may have reached the limit in terms of ascribing the problems of Asia and the Middle East to colonialism and its legacies. And the Hardt/Negri solution of the multitude marching onward was never more than an interesting attempt, one that raised more questions than it answered.

That impasse creates an opening for us, for a form of Marxism that has developed a rich, variegated dialectic that takes into account different forms of struggle – not only around labor, but also around race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and youth. Ours is also form of dialectic that takes account of counter-revolution within the revolution, a dialectical perspective born in the writings of Raya Dunayevskaya against Stalinist state-capitalism. Finally, our Marxist-Humanist dialectic points to what we are for, to a philosophically grounded alternative to capitalism that we invite all serious revolutionaries to join with us in creating. I can think of no more urgent task for our life and times.

Source: <http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/articles/overcoming-some-current-challenges-to-dialectical-thought/>