

# On Hegel, Rosa Luxemburg and Marxist-Humanism

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“Because the transformation of reality is central to the Hegelian dialectic, Hegel’s philosophy comes to life, over and over again, in all periods of crisis and transition, when a new historic turning point has been reached, when the established society is undermined and a foundation is laid for a new social order.”[\[1\]](#)

Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution* (1973)

In the *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel describes how, in the absolute terror/absolute freedom of the French Revolution, consciousness finds its immediate existence in the world of mere destruction: “anarchy striving to produce anarchy”, interminable faction fights, and the chopping off of heads as if they were cabbages. Seeing itself as essential being, this consciousness lacks any *reciprocal* relationship with the external world – “whether in reality in thought.” In the aftermath of the Revolution, the subjective moral individualism of the “Beautiful Soul” collapses into “self-willed impotence,” while its counterpart, bourgeois moral judgment, shows its “hypocrisy” in substituting “fine sentiments” for moral action.

Gillian Rose (1947-95), in her book *The Broken Middle* (1991), comments, “The Phenomenology charts here the transition from terror to morality under the signature of the beautiful soul, as in reversible order the omnipotence, the impotence, the hypocrisy of the political will.” In the twentieth century, Rose sees Rosa Luxemburg attempting to grapple with the “contrary barbarisms” of her day, by “attending consistently to the equivocation of the ethical – the perduring inversions of law.”[\[2\]](#)

Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) was attempting to steer a revolutionary course between the rocks of revisionist reformism in German Social Democracy and sectarian centralism in Russian Bolshevism. In the case of revisionism, Luxemburg saw further than Lenin in exposing Bernstein’s reformism as the intelligible and predictable outcome of social democracy. Raya Dunayevskaya (1910-87) says that while Luxemburg firmly rejected the revisionist attempt to “remove the

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dialectical scaffolding” from Marxism, she was nevertheless “nearly totally deaf on philosophy.”[\[3\]](#)

Although Luxemburg didn’t recognize Hegel, her struggles to unify theory and practice dialectically can, according to Gillian Rose, be read, so to speak, through Hegel. Rose sees the new appearance of bourgeois moral judgment in the reformism of German social democracy, and sees the new appearance of “pure culture” in Russian Bolshevism’s attempt to substitute itself for the non-existent bourgeois legal structure, in the name of the organization of the party.[\[4\]](#)

As an alternative to both of these organizational forms, Luxemburg argued that for the popular masses to impose the dictatorship of the proletariat they would have to go “outside” and “beyond” the existing society. According to Rose, this “beyond and outside” was no appeal to a utopia (as was suggested by George Lukacs in his critique of Luxemburg), but recognition of an “aporia”: a state of being which, caught in the schism between theory and practice, lacks any discernable path of transcendence, and is resistant to any Kantian a priori logic and determination. In concrete terms, resolving the aporia would require the difficult union of the daily struggle and “the great world transformation”. This new movement would have to grope along the path between the *Scylla* of abandoning the mass character of the social democratic party and the *Charybdis* of abandoning the goal of socialist transformation. The twin perils of reformism and militant sectarianism were both characterized by opportunism, and both represented an organizational formalism that substituted itself for the daily struggle and the justified *anxiety* as to the outcome.

Lenin saw the discipline of the capitalist factory as “educating” the workers for the organization of socialism. German social democracy went further and assigned a positive consciousness-forming role to the centralized bureaucracy of the bourgeois state. In neither case, argued Luxemburg, was there a unity of ends and means; rather, a failure, not only to recognize the autonomy of the working class, but also to “enclose”, “educate and assimilate” those non-proletarian forces that were attracted to the party. In Germany the failure installed the germ of later instability for the movement, leading to counter-revolution and eventually fascism.

In her 1904 critique of the Bolsheviks, Luxemburg criticized a “subjectivism” that would attempt to bar the way to opportunism “by means of clauses in a party constitution”.[\[5\]](#) What was needed was an organizational plasticity:

“Socialism in life demands a complete spiritual transformation in the masses degraded by centuries of bourgeois rule... No one knows this better, describes it more penetratingly; repeats it more stubbornly than Lenin. But he is completely mistaken in the means he employs...The only way to a rebirth is the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion. It is rule by terror which demoralizes.”

But no sooner had Luxemburg penned this critique than the Russian Revolution of 1905 overthrew the role of the revolutionary as “schoolmaster” and inspired her theory of the “Mass Strike.” In this new form of struggle arose the possibility of overcoming the movement’s antinomies: of the political and the economic; and of the organized and non-organized forces of revolution (a point stressed by Dunayevskaya in her book on Luxemburg). [6] As Rose argues, this prognosis may be taken “counter-suggestively as a prophetic index of the counter-revolutionary politics that are likely to ensue when non-organized workers are not rallied and do not rally to the political and economic struggle”; it is the “incipient insight that barbarism without ‘socialism’ leads to some form of fascism.”

Rose sees any utilitarian form of “Marxism,” basing itself on the instrumental use of a “materialist” theory, as in fact resting on “the idealist assumption that social reality is an object and that its definition depends on revolutionary consciousness.” Failure to recognize that “reality is ethical” is to risk either terror or the strengthening of arbitrary and universal bourgeois law. Rose argues that, unless the absolute can be thought, Hegel’s philosophy can have no social import. The absolute is not some determining externality in relation to nature and human activity; [7] rather Hegel’s concept of absolute ethical life is an “elusive” critique of bourgeois property relations which eschews the domination of the concept through practical reason. [8]

Dunayevskaya points out that for Marx, the absolute of capital is the “absolute general law of accumulation.” Rose says that, in Marx’s exposition of capital, his theory of commodity fetishism “comes nearest to demonstrating in the historically specific case of commodity producing society how substance is (mis-)represented as subject, how necessary illusion arises out of productive activity.” [9]

With the reduction of concrete to abstract labor, the value-form assumes the character of “phantasmagoria.” Its secret lies in the commodity-form itself and the “peculiar social character of the labor which produces it.” It can only be penetrated by its anti-concept: “freely associated labor.” In Dunayevskaya’s interpretation:

“Thus as we enter into the fetishism of commodities, it is clear that it is neither just appearance that we are dealing with, even just essence, though the latter remains quintessential for understanding appearance, for knowing what ‘lies behind’. But to get to the totality we cannot leave it at objectivity. The objective may outweigh the subjective, but unless we see the unity of the two and grapple with the truth of both, we will never be free. And freedom is what all the striving is about.” [10]

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[1] Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 1973, p. xv.

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[2] Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 1995, pp. 198-216

[3] Dunayevskaya, *Power of Negativity*, 2002, 255, 287.

[4] Rose, *Broken Middle* 1995, pp. 198-216

[5] *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* (eds. Anderson and Hudis) 2004, pp. 248-266

[6] R Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* 1982

[7] Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* 1981, 219

[8] Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 91

[9] *Hegel Contra Sociology* , pp. 232-33

[10] Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg* 143-44

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