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Marcuse's and Fromm's Correspondence with the Socialist Feminist Raya Dunayevskaya: A New Window on Critical Theory

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During the years 1954 to 1978, the Marxist-Humanist and feminist philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya corresponded separately but intensively with two noted members of the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm. The correspondence covered dialectical social theory, socialist humanism, the structure and contradictions of modern capitalism, and feminism and revolution. As a whole, these exchanges illustrate the deeply Marxist and humanist concerns of all three of these thinkers. The correspondence also highlights their significant differences as they discussed the degree to which the ideas of Marx and Hegel could continue to underpin an analysis of capitalist modernity and its forces of opposition.

Marcuse and Fromm were the only two members of the Frankfurt School who engaged in dialogue with Dunayevskaya, a lifelong revolutionary thinker and activist. A self-educated movement intellectual without any university training, Dunayevskaya was born in Ukraine and grew up in the Maxwell Street Jewish ghetto, later torn down and replaced by the University of Illinois at Chicago. Prior to her correspondence with Marcuse, which began in 1954, Dunayevskaya had served as a secretary to Trotsky in Mexico. She was known as a critic from the left of the USSR, and had worked closely with the noted Afro-Caribbean Marxist C.L.R. James. During the period of her most intensive correspondence with Marcuse, she completed her first book, *Marxism and Freedom* (1958), a study of Marxism from a humanistic standpoint in which her first English translations of Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* and of Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks on Hegel appeared as the appendix. Marcuse contributed the preface to this book, in which, while agreeing with Dunayevskaya's dialectical and humanist reading of Marx, he argues against her interpretation of the modern working class as a site of resistance based upon rank and file and Black workers. In this preface, he articulates perhaps for the first time in published form, his one-dimensionality thesis concerning the modern working class.

Despite their differences, which erupted in an acrimonious debate over Freud and radical change in 1955, both Marcuse and Fromm generally supported the radical movements of the 1960s, from which their erstwhile Frankfurt School colleagues Horkheimer and Adorno recoiled. The extensive correspondence of both Marcuse and Fromm with Dunayevskaya, who certainly saw the transcendence of domination and alienation as a concrete historical possibility in the postwar capitalist order, is also suggestive of some



important affinities between these two Frankfurt School thinkers, and of differences with the less politically radical version of the Frankfurt School that had been re-established in the 1950s in Germany under the direction of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Moreover, on a more theoretical level, it should be noted that Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* were central to the major published work of Marcuse, Fromm, and Dunayevskaya, something that could not be said of Adorno or Horkheimer.

In the period before Dunayevskaya and Marcuse began to correspond in 1954, Marcuse was known to U.S. intellectuals mainly as the author of *Reason and Revolution* (1941), a pioneering study of Hegel from a critical Marxist standpoint that also contained the first serious discussion in English of Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*. But in 1955 he became more widely known for his radically liberatory interpretation of Freud in *Eros and Civilization*, which he was completing as their correspondence began.

Dunayevskaya initiated the correspondence with Marcuse with a letter of December 7, 1954, at a time when her break with C. L. R. James was already in the offing. At this time, Dunayevskaya no longer had among her own colleagues a real philosophical interlocutor. From Marcuse's side, although the correspondence surely did not loom as large on his intellectual agenda, it should be noted that with Horkheimer and Adorno back in Germany and McCarthyism raging, he too was more isolated, at least in terms of others with whom to engage in serious dialogues on Hegel or on Marxist theory. During the early and most fruitful years of their correspondence, 1955-60, Marcuse was to be sure somewhat interested, as was Dunayevskaya primarily, in dialogue about dialectics, but by 1960 he was also raising issues with her like the sociology of work and more broadly, the new features of postwar U.S. capitalist society.

Despite some differences over the dialectic, especially concerning the relevance to a critique of modern capitalism of Hegel's concept of absolute negativity, their correspondence in this period was based on strong intellectual affinities as well as differences. These affinities are illustrated by Marcuse's remark upon reading some draft material for Dunayevskaya's *Marxism and Freedom*: "Your ideas are a real oasis in the desert of Marxist thought" (letter of December 2, 1955). In a letter of May 3, 1956, Dunayevskaya also expressed enthusiasm over their correspondence: "You have no idea how your encouraging words help me proceed with my work. As you no doubt know, my entry into the 'intellectual world' was thru very unorthodox ways and you are the first not to make me feel like a fish out of water."

Dunayevskaya also commented briefly on *Eros and Civilization* during this period: "Your original contribution lies in your extraction of 'Eros' from being in a field by itself and placing it within the historical context of Western civilization.... You thereby illuminated the field of psychoanalysis" (letter of September 6, 1956). She also hinted that she found Marcuse's critique of Fromm convincing, commissioning a very positive review of *Eros and Civilization* in *News & Letters*, the Detroit-based paper she had founded in 1955.

Marcuse's new preface to the 1960 edition of *Reason and Revolution*, "A Note on the Dialectic," also showed another point of difference. In that preface, he wrote: "I believe that it is the idea of Reason itself which is the undialectical element in Hegel's philosophy.... It may even be justifiable, logically as well as historically, to define Reason in terms which include slavery, the Inquisition, child labor, concentration camps, gas



chambers, and nuclear preparedness.” Dunayevskaya, who appears to have first read this preface some years later, came to believe that it represented a major shift from the earlier perspective of 1941, when Marcuse had extolled dialectical reason and freedom as a bulwark against fascism, as shown in the book’s very title, *Reason and Revolution*. The original 1941 text is filled with lines like these: “The revolution requires the maturity of many forces, but the greatest among them is the subjective force, namely the revolutionary class itself. The realization of freedom requires the free rationality of those who achieve it.”

Marcuse’s new perspective on dialectics of 1960 may have been connected to the Nietzschean approach of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), which itself marked a turn away from the Hegelian Marxism of the prewar Frankfurt School.

Another element of difference that emerged between Dunayevskaya and Marcuse can be seen in Dunayevskaya’s review of Marcuse’s *Soviet Marxism* in 1961, which accusing him of uncritical stance toward the USSR. This came after an acrimonious exchange of letters over Cuba, where Marcuse held that Dunayevskaya’s critiques of Castro’s Cuba had State Department overtones, something that outraged Dunayevskaya.

But before their correspondence cooled in 1961, some very interesting dialogue took place over the U.S. working class. Marcuse’s letter to Dunayevskaya of August 8, 1960 asked for her response to his work on what was to become his best-known book, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), an aspect of the correspondence that Douglas Kellner was the first to discuss. Writing of his “new book with the tentative title *Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*,” Marcuse poses “a question of a changing...more affirmative attitude of the laborer not only to the system as a whole but even to the organization of work in the more highly organized plants.” Marcuse asks for Dunayevskaya’s “considered evaluation” of this issue in the U.S., as well as references to “American literature on this pro and con.”

Dunayevskaya’s response to Marcuse’s request — in a letter of August 16 — included a description of the current issue of *News & Letters*, particularly a section entitled “Workers Battle Automation,” which contained articles with “workers speaking for themselves on the conditions of labor and alleged high standard of living.” Dunayevskaya also carried out a sharp critique of recent writings by Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, and other liberal sociologists on labor, automation, class, and community.

Dunayevskaya also indicated that her own views differed “very radically” from those of Marcuse on these issues. She directs Marcuse’s attention to a debate between two of her worker activist colleagues concerning automation. One of them, Angela Terrano, had been quoted in *Marxism and Freedom* to the effect that work in a new society would have to be “something completely new, not just work to get money to buy food and things...It will have to be completely tied up with life.” Terrano rejected automation altogether as a heightened form of alienated labor. Charles Denby, the editor of *News & Letters* and the author of *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker’s Journal*, held that workers’ control of production and a shorter work-day, in the context of the abolition of capitalism, would be needed to realize the potentials of automation. In light of this, Dunayevskaya questions whether Marcuse, with his evocation of “the transformation of



the laboring classes,” had not “fallen into the trap of viewing Marxian socialism as if it were a distributive philosophy.”

Marcuse’s response, in a letter of August 24, 1960, includes explicit reference to a convergence of “interests” between capitalists and workers in “advanced industrial society.” He writes that “genuine automation” (instead of the current restricted, partial mode), which would “explode” the capitalist system, was being “held back by the capitalists as well as the workers.” They did so on different grounds: for the capitalists, “decline in the rate of profit, need for sweeping government controls, etc.; on the part of the workers, technological unemployment.” He concludes: “Re Angela T.: you should really tell her about all that humanization of labor, its connection with life, etc. — that this is possible only through complete automation, because such humanization is correctly relegated by Marx to the realm of freedom beyond the realm of necessity, i.e., beyond the entire realm of socially necessary labor in the material production. Total de-humanization of the latter is the prerequisite.”

Dunayevskaya’s next letter characterizes the leading liberal sociologists as “mechanical materialists” in the tradition of the Bolshevik theoretician Nikolai Bukharin, and she connects her critiques of automation and empirical sociology to him. She attacks Bukharin’s self-avowed mechanical materialism, something she links to Lenin’s characterization of Bukharin in his will as a gifted Marxist theoretician, albeit one who had failed to grasp the dialectic. In attacking Bukharin’s classic text, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (1921), a work later prefaced by Lipset, Dunayevskaya wrote:

“In place of self-activity, Bukharin, as all good determinists, looks for states of equilibrium; ‘laws’ of development, uniformity.... Even as today’s Soviet as well as American sciences, Bukharin keeps using categories of a lower order, particularly mathematical categories which preclude self-movement.”

This represented a parallel to the Frankfurt School’s critique of positivism within sociology, but with origins in Lenin and Trotskyism rather than Lukacs. It had emerged from the radical edge of the American Trotskyist tradition, as seen in the writings of the “Johnson-Forest Tendency,” led by C.L.R. James, Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee Boggs. During the 1940s, as part of a never-completed joint work on dialectics, they had contrasted Lenin’s Philosophical Notebooks to what they saw as Bukharin’s undialectical and mechanical materialism.

I would like to mention more briefly some of the major themes of the Dunayevskaya-Fromm correspondence, which began in 1959 with a letter from Fromm to Dunayevskaya about the young Marx. In addition to his work as a social psychologist, Fromm by this time was taking advantage of his standing as a major public intellectual to bring the young Marx to a wide public, as seen in his *Marx’s Concept of Man* (1961). In publishing the *1844 Manuscripts* along with his own long essay on Marx as a democratic and humanist thinker in this book, Fromm succeeded in getting Marx discussed positively in mass media outlets like *Newsweek*. As Fromm also defended the peace movement in this period, he experienced very nasty attacks from future neocons like Daniel Bell, Sidney Hook, and Lewis Feuer, both on the young Marx and on his “appeasement” of the USSR, which in fact Fromm had criticized as a form of totalitarian state capitalism.

It was above all the socialist humanist thread in Fromm’s work, as well as his surprising



degree of sympathy for both Lenin and Trotsky, which constituted the intellectual affinity that sustained the Dunayevskaya-Fromm correspondence. These threads of affinity coexisted with some important differences of opinion and intellectual interests, although these were not usually expressed openly. At a political level, Dunayevskaya's positions were much further to the left than were Fromm's, whose socialist humanism was closer to reformist social democracy than her revolutionary version of Marxist-Humanism. Moreover, Dunayevskaya was not that interested in Freud, and although Fromm cited respectfully Hegelian interpretations of Marx as found in the work of Lukacs, Marcuse, and Dunayevskaya, he himself did not engage in that kind of work.

During the years of her correspondence with Fromm, 1959-78, Dunayevskaya contributed to Fromm's widely circulated collection, *Socialist Humanism* (1965), a book that linked both of them more deeply to Marxist oppositionists in Eastern Europe, especially Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. Fromm also helped her to find both a German and a Spanish publisher for her second book, *Philosophy and Revolution* (1973). She in turn gave Fromm some comments as he was developing his last book dealing with Marx, *To Have or to Be?* (1976). Their correspondence is also filled with pungent assessments of Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer, as well as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

Take for example Fromm's letter of November 25, 1976 criticizing Marcuse and the Frankfurt School, and dismissing its whole notion of critical theory as a subterfuge in order to avoid any explicit mention of Marxism. Let me quote the part on Horkheimer and Adorno:

"Horkheimer is now quoted as the creator of the Critical Theory and people write about the Critical Theory as if it were a new concept discovered by Horkheimer. As far as I know, the whole thing is a hoax because Horkheimer was frightened even before Hitler of speaking about Marxist theory. He used in general Aesopian language and spoke of Critical Theory in order not to say Marxist theory. I believe that is all, behind this great discovery of Critical Theory by Horkheimer and Adorno."

Fromm also attacked Marcuse in nearly as strong terms. In her response of November 30, 1976, Dunayevskaya defends Marcuse to a point:

"He surely is no coward, and his *Reason and Revolution* surely did not hide his Marxism, as he understands it.... What was strange in... the 1950s, is that our fights were over my 'optimism' and 'romanticism' over proletariat and Black; he used to argue that they only want a 'piece of the American pie,' and while he doesn't oppose that, it couldn't be called 'revolutionary,' as I insisted. He also opposed my view of the East German Revolt of 1953 as revolution from under totalitarianism, saying it was only because Germans couldn't stand Russians, etc. And I got nowhere with him when I tried to convince him that he shouldn't use 'Marxism' when he was speaking of Russian communism."

As to Adorno, she recalls that she had run into some hostility at a meeting the Hegel Society after criticizing his *Negative Dialectics* in her paper.

The last exchange between Fromm and Dunayevskaya took up Rosa Luxemburg and gender. It elicited this 1978 comment from Fromm, who was responding to Dunayevskaya's reflections concerning a feminist dimension to Luxemburg:



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“I feel that the male Social Democrats never could understand Rosa Luxemburg, nor could she acquire the influence for which she had the potential because she was a woman; and the men could not become full revolutionaries because they did not emancipate themselves from their male, patriarchal, and hence dominating, character structure.... I believe she was one of the few fully developed human beings, one who showed what a human being can be in the future.... Unfortunately I have known nobody who still knows her personally. What a bad break between the generations.”