Developing a Philosophically Grounded Alternative to Capitalism: A Marxist-Humanist Perspective

by Peter Hudis

There is no more important task facing us today than to refute the claim that "there is no alternative" to capitalism. The assertion that humanity is now forever fated to endure one or another form of capitalism dominates public discourse East and West, North and South and represents the foremost barrier to generating opposition to imperialist war, economic injustice, and environmental destruction. It may once have been possible to get by with the idea that struggles against various forms of oppression will undermine the foundation of existing society to the point that leftist theoreticians could then step in to suggest the ultimate solution. However, that standpoint is no longer viable. Masses of people around the world today want an idea of what kind of society can replace capitalism even before entering the struggle. The foremost challenge facing us to address the question "what happens after" the revolution before it occurs.

This may seem to present the matter upside down. How can we address what happens after a revolution when revolution itself is so far off? As I see it, those who argue along these lines take for granted why the idea of revolution is in crisis in the first place. A major reason it is in crisis is the failure of many revolutions to surmount the problems associated with capitalism, racism, and sexual and national oppression. The bankruptcy of the Stalinist model of "socialism" is clear; in virtually every case it turned out to be a "transitional" stage to nothing more than traditional capitalism. But the idea of socialism is in not only in crisis because of the tyrants and dictators who ruled in its name. We are also suffering from the reluctance of much of the ant-Stalinist Left to develop a viable concept of socialism based on a creative re-thinking of Marx’s ideas in light of the contributions and limitations of the greatest Marxists who followed him.

In light of this, I would like to explore whether Marx’s work, as well as that of some of the greatest Marxists who followed him, contain a deeper and more viable concept of a new society than has characterized much of the radical movement, and does it speak to our need today for an alternative to global capitalism?

Let’s begin with one of the greatest revolutionaries who ever lived—Rosa Luxemburg. She wrote the earliest study of what we now call the globalization of capital; she a sharp critic of imperialism and its destruction of indigenous social formations in the Third World; she developed the theory of spontaneous mass revolt in The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions; and she was the earliest and most trenchant left-wing critic of the suppression of democracy and workers’ rights by the Bolsheviks after their seizure of power in Russia in 1917. And although she died before much of Marx’s philosophic writings were published and became widely known
(such as Marx’s Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Grundrisse), and although she never engaged in a direct study of dialectical philosophy herself, she had some important things to say about Hegel’s dialectic and its impact on Marx.

This can be seen from her attack on reformism in her 1898 Reform or Revolution. In response to Bernstein’s assertion that “dialectical scaffolding” of Marx’s work was unnecessary, she called dialectics “the intellectual arm of the proletariat” and spelled out its importance thusly: “The key which enabled Marx to open the door to the secrets of capitalist phenomena” was his concept of “the socialist future of the world....It was only because Marx looked at capitalism from the socialist’s viewpoint, that is from the historic viewpoint, that he was enabled to decipher the hieroglyphics of capitalist economy.” In Capital, Marx wrote that the value-form of products of labor in capitalism appears as a “hieroglyphic,” in that “value does not have its description branded on its forehead.” Capitalism is inherently mystifying, since unlike feudalism it is based on indirectly social labor. Human relations take on the form of relations between things because that is what they “really are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things.” Luxemburg argued that it is impossible to see through capitalism’s false but necessary forms of appearance unless it is analyzed from the vantage point of a concept of its transcendence—socialism, a new society.

Luxemburg made a similar point in a 1902 essay, entitled “From the Legacy of Our Masters.” She said it was only because Marx had an “a priori formulation” of a new society before he embarked on his analysis of capitalism that he was able to “find his way through the labyrinth of everyday facts of modern society to the scientific laws of its development and downfall.” And as she wrote in a review of Marx’s Theories of Surplus Value in 1905: “Marx utterly transformed the position vis a vis his object of investigation” in taking the “position of the socialist, who glances over the boundaries of the bourgeois economic form from a higher viewpoint. In short, it was the dialectic method of Marx which created the possibility of bringing analysis to bear on the particular problems of economics.” As she saw it, jamming together a concept of a socialist society with reality is the key to dialectics. And as she stated in her Mass Strike pamphlet, “dialectics [is] the rock on which the whole teaching of Marxism rests.”

So did Luxemburg provide us with a fleshed-out concept of a socialist society? Well, not quite. She actually wrote little in the way of a sustained or direct discussion of socialism. This wasn’t at all unique to her. It was typical of Marxists of her time. Post-Marx Marxists took it as an axiomatic principle that any speculation about a future society was fruitless. Marx’s opposition to utopianism was taken to mean that a new society cannot be described in thought until it first appears in life. To the extent that the socialism was discussed, it was assumed that socialism means replacing private property and “market anarchy” with collective property and a “planned economy.”
In the last year of her life, in response to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the German Revolutions of 1918 and 1919, Luxemburg moved toward a deeper and more far-reaching concept of socialism than the juridical counterpoising of plan versus planlessness as the absolute class opposites. However, despite this—and despite her contention the real nature of capitalism can be grasped only from the vantage point of a fleshed-out concept of socialism—she never lived to provide a detailed or systematic discussion of the nature of a socialist society. It’s one thing to state the need to grasp reality from the vantage point of the idea of a new society, and quite another to bring to reality a sufficiently developed concept of socialism that would make that possible.

Why did even some of the best post-Marx Marxists shy away from the question what happens after the revolution? The reason, as I see it, was their lack of concreteness on dialectics. Few Marxists of Luxemburg’s time seriously studied Hegelian dialectics, despite paying occasional lip service to “dialectical materialism”—a phrase that was never used by Marx (it which was invented by George Plekhanov). In those rare cases when dialectics was mentioned, it was viewed as a progressive movement in nature and history that is independent of human will. As Plekhanov put it, “Marx drove idealism out of this, its last refuge. Like Hegel, he viewed the history of humanity as a lawful process, independent of human will... he tried to trace to a single universal source all acting and mutually interacting forces in social life.” This perspective reflected the tendency of those in and around the Second and Third Internationals to comport “dialectics” with the evolutionist and determinist outlook of European positivism. Such a reduction of “dialectics” to the expression of fixed laws of nature tended to detach dialectical thought from the process of actual revolution and revolutionary forces.

In other words, to the extent that “dialectics” was approached, it was seen as tool of “practical fighters”; it was not seen as inseparable from and as important as revolutionary practice itself. It was taken for granted. As a result, the content of a future, socialist society became taken for granted.

This was also true of Lenin, even though he responded to the collapse of established Marxism in 1914 by seriously studying Hegel—in the course of which he broke from his earlier vulgar materialism, In his “Abstract of Hegel’s Science of Logic,” he wrote: “Plekhanov wrote probably 1,000 pages... on philosophy. Yet there is nil in them about the Larger Logic, its thoughts (i.e., dialectic proper, as a philosophic science, nil!” This critique was not only directed against Plekhanov, but also Lenin’s own earlier photocopy theory of knowledge. In contrast to the position contained in his crude 1908 book, Materialism and Empiro-Criticism, Lenin wrote in his 1914-15 Philosophic Notebooks, “cognition does not reflect the objective world, it also creates it.”

Lenin was the first revolutionary before Lukács to seriously return to Hegel and question the sharp separation between “idealism” and “materialism” that defined post-Marx Marxism. However, even Lenin stopped short of transcending this opposition between idealism and materialism. When in 1914 reached the final chapter of Hegel’s
Logic, where Hegel develops the concept of “absolute negativity,” Lenin emphasized “materialism” and “objective world connections,” but not the idea of absolute negativity itself. “Materialism” in his eyes still predominated over “idealism.”

Let’s slow down here to see what that entails. According to Hegel, history consists of a development through contradiction in which barriers to the realization of freedom are overcome at the time as the accomplishments of each preceding stage are absorbed. However, the resulting transcendence of alienation is not achieved simply by negating external obstacles to self-development. Negation, Hegel showed, is dependent on the object of its critique; the act of negating external obstacles still leaves one beholden upon them in some way. The full transcendence of alienation is achieved by negating the initial act of negation itself—what Hegel called “the negation of the negation.” In moving beyond “bare” or “first negation” to second or absolute negation, the subject achieves not only the destruction of the old but also the creation of the new.

This concept proved crucial to Marx, who critically appropriated Hegel’s idea of absolute negativity in developing his unique concept of a total uprooting of class society. In his famous Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx attacked not only existing society but also what he called “crude communism” for presuming that the abolition of private property and the market is sufficient to abolish capitalism. Marx held that the negation of private property was a necessary but insufficient condition for liberation, since it is a first negation that is still dependent upon the object of its critique. Marx wrote that replacing private property with collective property does not liberate humanity from the idea that ownership or having is the defining principle of society; it just re-affirms it on another level. He wrote, “How little this annulment of private property is really an appropriation is in fact proved by the abstract negation of the entire world of culture and civilization, the regression to the unnatural simplicity of the poor and crude man who has few needs.” For Marx, genuine communism, which he also called “positive humanism, beginning from itself” could be reached only if the negation of private property is followed by a second negation that abolishes alienated labor. He wrote, “Communism is the position as the negation of the negation, and is hence the actual phase necessary for the next stage of historical development in the process of human emancipation and rehabilitation.” On this basis Marx transformed Hegel’s dialectical philosophy into a dialectical concept of revolution.

Tragically, post-Marx Marxists were not raised on the depth of Marx’s vision of a new society found in his 1844 Manuscripts. Marx’s philosophic writings lay buried in the archives until the 1930s. By then, the Russian Revolution had degenerated under Stalinism. The notion that “socialism” equals the abolition of private property and the “free market” through its replacement by collective property and central planning became a fixity of popular prejudice. Western Social-Democracy held to the same basic assumptions, with the caveat that democratic structures were needed instead of the single-party state. And even Leon Trotsky, who fought both Stalinism and Social
Democracy, never returned to the ground that Marx laid down in defining a new society as the negation of both capitalist private property and “vulgar communism.”

Though it might not seem obvious, the reason post-Marx Marxists didn’t find their way to Marx’s much more expansive view of a totally new society is that they paid little heed to dialectical philosophy. Even the best of them proceeded from an ontology, from a view of reality, that was premised on the separation of idealism and materialism. However, in both his early philosophic writings and in Capital, Marx went beyond the notion that idealism and materialism are ontologically opposed entities. He proclaimed a “new humanism” that “distinguishes itself from both idealism and materialism and is at the same time the truth uniting them both.” Just as Marx’s “a priori” concept of a new society is based on the transcendence of the division between mental and manual labor, so his view of human reality admits of no ontological divide between idealism and materialism. Marx engaged in a rigorous, painstaking analysis of the material life process of capitalist society from the vantage point of an idea—the idea of the transcendence of value production that he reached by transforming Hegel’s concept of absolute negativity into a philosophy of “revolution in permanence.” The fact that Marx refrained from speculating about the nature of a future new society does not mean that the concept of such a new society did not inform his analysis of capitalism.

Yet once it was assumed that Marxism equals “materialism,” and that materialism is the opposite of “idealism,” the notion that the transcendence of capitalist alienation requires bringing the idea of a new society to bear on the struggles against capitalism simply did not and could not sink in. “Dialectics” was either became an abstract academic pursuit (as with the Frankfurt School), or it was reduced to a theory of inevitable historical progress that had little to do with the dialectics of revolution.

So is there any current within the radical tradition that provides the ground for surpassing these limitations of post-Marx Marxism and meeting today’s need for a viable concept of a new society that can transcend capitalism?

One current in independent Marxism deserves a hearing in this regard—Marxist-Humanism. The philosophy of Marxist-Humanism was founded in the U.S. by Raya Dunayevskaya, though it has also been developed by thinkers in Eastern Europe, China, Africa and Latin America. Marxist-Humanism first emerged in response to the transformation into opposition of the 1917 Russian Revolution into a totalitarian society under Stalin. Raya Dunayevskaya, who was originally from Ukraine but did most of her work in the U.S., published the first Marxist analysis of the Soviet economy based on original sources, in 1942. She argued that Stalin’s Russia was neither a “deformed workers’ state” nor a society unforeseen by Marx. She argued that it was a state-capitalist society that operated according to the capitalist law of value. From the 1940s to her death in 1987, she was known as one of the most trenchant left-wing critics of state-capitalism regimes that called themselves “Communist”—not only the USSR but also of Mao’s China—as well as a fervent opponent of Western imperialism.
In the 1950s, Dunayevskaya became the first to translate into English Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts, in which Marx appropriated Hegel’s concept of “absolute negativity” in developing his philosophy of “revolution in permanence.” She argued that the transformation of the Russian Revolution into its opposite under Stalin was a prime expression of what Marx meant by “vulgar communism.” She also held that Marx’s statement in Capital that “the limit of capital accumulation would not be reached in any particular society until the entire social capital would be united, either in the hands of one single capitalist” or the state anticipated the state-capitalism of the twentieth century. In the face of the rise of single-party states that called themselves “socialist,” she argued for a creative return to Marx’s roots in Hegel by making explicit for our day a vision of a new society that goes beyond the mere first negation of capitalism.

Marxist-Humanism also arose as a response to new kinds of freedom struggles. These included: 1) The rank and file workers’ struggles against automated production, which gave new concreteness to Marx’s critique of alienated labor; 2) The women’s liberation movement, which attacked male chauvinism not only in existing society but also within the Left—therefore giving new life to the notion that forward movement proceeds by “negating the negation”; 3) The Black revolution in the U.S. and Africa, which raised the perspective of a consciousness of self as the basis of revolutionary transformation. Frantz Fanon, who also called himself a humanist, was the most prominent proponent of this perspective. As Dunayevskaya wrote in American Civilization on Trial: Black Masses as Vanguard, “The unmasking of Western civilization’s racism by its Black dimension in revolutionary moments of mass upsurge makes imperative a most serious return…to [Marx’s] critical, revolutionary unmasking of Western civilization’s capitalist foundations….The Black dimension in the U.S. as well as in Africa showed that we had, indeed, reached a totally new movement from practice that was itself a form of theory. It is this new movement from practice…[that] demanded a new movement from theory be rooted in that movement from practice and become developed to the point of philosophy—a philosophy of world revolution.”

Dunayevskaya argued that, “There is but one dialectical conceptual framework, an indivisible whole which does not divide economics and politics from Subject: masses in motion.” This single dialectical course “determines the objective and subjective forces.” A single dialectic signifies that dialectics is not only a method of thought, but a dialectic of liberation. A different ontology is at work here than the separation of idealism and materialism that characterized post-Marx Marxism. In other words, Marxist-Humanism does not only affirm the unity of materialism and idealism as a philosophic principle. It also sees it as operative in reality, in that the unity of idealism and materialism is what forces of revolution reach for in struggling against the separation between between mental and manual labor. However, this does not mean that philosophy is simply a mirror reflection of practical struggles. As Dunayevskaya wrote in Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation, and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution, “neither did ‘the self-determination of the Idea’ exhaust itself by being parallel with the self-
determination of nations” and of peoples. The question of whether particular struggles are within the bounds of capital or instead point to its transcendence has to itself be proved, and that can be done only by approaching them from the vantage point of a vision of a new society rooted in the concept of absolute negativity. Just as the logic of capital cannot be grasped apart from the vantage point of the idea, so that idea provides a measure as to whether or not a movement from practice is itself a form of theory.

This relationship between philosophy and practice is the active, organizational concretization of the unity of idealism and materialism needed to forge continuity with Marx. Post-Marx Marxism is a pejorative insofar as it has recoiled from working out this active relationship. It has led to an impasse in projecting a viable concept of socialism.

To find a way out of this impasse, we must first of all put aside the idea that socialism can be created by taking over the existing formations of capitalism. For decades, many leftists held that the historical progress of capitalism will bring forth the new society in quasi-automatic fashion. The concentration and centralization of capital, it was argued, will create the material basis for “socialism.” All that was needed to create socialism was to “take over” the “commanding heights” of industry and the state once the concentration of capital reached a high level of development. The non-viability of this objectivist, historicist view became obvious by the 1980s, when the concentration and centralization of capital led not to socialism, but back to “free market” capitalism.

Many radicals, of course, are not determinists or objectivists. Some stress the subjective side, as in arguing that the forms of organization created by spontaneous struggles will provide the answer to “what happens after” the revolution. Many who correctly stress the creativity of spontaneous self-activity, however, also argue against “speculating” about the future on the grounds that doing so imposes blueprints on the masses. The non-viability of this approach also became obvious by the 1980s. For example, although Poland’s workers in 1980-81 created a new form of self-organization ten million strong with Solidarnosc, it did not lead, as many expected, to socialism. Nor did the massive and creative self-mobilizations in much of Latin America and Africa. Something was missing, even when such creative forms of revolt emerged.

So what was missing? Was it the “correct” Leninist “vanguard party”? I don’t think so. If anything, there has been too many elitist parties contending for leadership and control over the masses. What has been missing, I would argue, is a concept of socialism that goes beyond taking over the structures of the old society and which speaks to the desire for new human relations among those suffering from capitalist dehumanization. I wish to end by briefly illustrating how Marxist-Humanists approach this when it comes to such issues as the state, organization, and the labor process.

Many have affirmed freedom and democracy as the goal of struggle while creating organizations defined by a division of labor between workers and intellectuals and theorists and activists. As a result, the hallmark of class society—the division
between mental and manual labor—defines their organizational structures. It is therefore no accident that when such groups take power the hierarchical division of labor is left untouched. For this reason, the “Leninist” vanguard party is no longer viable. This does not mean that organization should be dispensed with in the name of applauding spontaneous struggles, important as they are. The problems encountered by Leninist and anti-Leninist tendencies in articulating an alternative to capitalism points to the need to work out a new relation between philosophy and organization. It is no longer sufficient (though it remains necessary) to break politically from the concept of a vanguard party. We need to go further, by recognizing that while decentralized and spontaneous forms of organization are the opposite of the elitist party, they do not free us from the need to take organizational responsibility for a philosophy of “revolution in permanence.” Needed is a new relation between philosophy and organization.

We also now from bitter experience that taking over existing forms of industry, even when under the control of a “progressive” regime, does not lead to the abolition of capital. The transcendence of capitalism requires freely associated relations of labor that abolish the law of value. Even cooperatives and worker-run enterprises, which are important for prefiguring the future, do not constitute the abolition of capitalism. As Marx put it, so long as “cooperative factories run by workers [exist within capitalism they]…naturally reproduce in all cases, in their present organization, all the defects of the existing system, and must reproduce them…the workers in association become their own capitalist, i.e., they use the means of production to valorize their own labor.”

To envision how a revolution can transcend capitalist value production, we must begin by continuing Marx’s unchaining of the dialectic organizationally, with the principles he outlined in his Critique of the Gotha Program—the work in which he issued his fullest discussion of what happens after the revolution in the course of a critique of a supposedly socialist organizational program. In that work, Marx argued that the first step in any effort to successfully uproot capitalism must be the abolition of labor power as a commodity and alienated labor. This profound transformation of labor at the point of production—no longer alienated labor, but now directly social labor—is the pivot upon which the revolutionary transformation of the whole society must turn, short of which the social relations of capitalist society can only be re-inscribed.

Marx returned to these issues in his writings on technologically underdeveloped nations in the last years of his life—a dimension of Marx’s work that has been much neglected, but which Marxist-Humanists place much emphasis upon. In his Ethnological Notebooks on Native American societies, his letters on the Russian peasant commune, and his notebooks on pre-capitalist communal formations in North Africa, India, and Sumatra, Marx envisioned the possibility of technologically underdeveloped societies bypassing the stage of capitalistic industrialization—so long as a number of specific conditions were met. However, unlike Engels’ position (outlined in his Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State), Marx did not envision the new society as an updating of pre-capitalist communal forms through the additive of technology—even
when he viewed such forms as higher, in many respects, than what prevailed in the West. In his *Ethnological Notebooks*, he singled out the freer and more liberatory man-woman relations of the Iroquois, and he praised the Zulus of South Africa because, as he put it, “it never entered…their heads that the earth and sky might be the work of an invisible Being.” He also emphasized the “dignity of Mohammad’s sons” (as he put it in a letter of 1882) for their opposition to French colonialism. However, Marx did not conceive of the new society as consisting in “taking over” even the relatively advanced features that he found in such non-Western societies. As he put it in discussing the Arabs of North Africa, “Even the poorest Moor excels the greatest European….Nevertheless, they will go to rack and ruin without a revolutionary movement.”

And what of the state? Is it really true, as many still argue, that creating socialism entails taking over the existing state through the seizure of power? And if that is not the answer, should we refrain from dealing with the state altogether by creating islands of socialistic existence in a sea of capitalism? What both positions may take for granted is the need to *smash* the state. That is what Lenin posed in *State and Revolution* in 1917, when he rediscovered Marx’s discussion of the state in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Marx there stated that the path to socialism lies in “converting the state from an organ superimposed on society into one completely subordinate to it.” The “political transition period” between capitalism and socialism does not consist in strengthening the state at the expense of society, but of subordinating the state to the interests of society. The tragedy, of course, is that despite Lenin’s correct emphasis in *State and Revolution* on the need to *smash* the state, that perspective was never actualized after 1917. The Bolsheviks instead largely made use of the existing machinery of the old Czarist state, as Lenin freely admitted in 1919. And certainly no revolution since 1917 has actualized Marx’s perspective that the transition to socialism hinges upon subordinating the state to popular power. A “non-state form” such as the Paris Commune, which Marx said in 1875 is needed to make possible the transition to socialism, has not yet arisen. But does that mean that we can afford to repeat the errors of the past by acting as if we have no choice but to “take over” institutions of domination that are inseparable from capital? The state is not just a neutral tool that can be “used.” Far more often than not, it is the state that ends up using us.

As Frantz Fanon wrote, “we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.” What we are in need of, he insisted, is a new humanism. In light of the rich history of freedom struggles in South Africa and elsewhere, it is worth exploring whether a Marxist humanist philosophy rooted in a concept of “absolute negativity” can speak to today’s crisis. We are certainly in need of some new beginnings, which make a dialogue on this issues all the more important.
Notes


3 Capital, p. 166.


10 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, p. 306.

11 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, p. 336.


13 American Civilization on Trial: Black masses as Vanguard, by Raya Dunayevskaya (Chicago: News and Letters, 2003), pp. 8, 10.

14 Raya Dunayevskaya, Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation, and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution, p. 119.

15 Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation, and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution, p. 194.


20 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963).