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On: 07 October 2011, At: 05:43

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Socialism and Democracy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csad20>

Book Reviews

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Available online: 26 Jul 2011

To cite this article: Robert Ross, Peter Rachleff, Stephen McFarland Jr., Ronald Paul, John Maerhofer, Peter Seybold, Howard Pflanzler, Cliff DuRand, Peter Roman, Gerald Meyer & Shannon Brincat (2011): Book Reviews, *Socialism and Democracy*, 25:2, 164-200

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2011.576080>

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Book Reviews

Steve Early, *Embedded With Organized Labor: Journalistic Reflections on the Class War at Home* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009).

Only Steve Early, writing about the recent succession to the Presidency of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), could have written:

[T]he process of replacing [Andy] Stern has been about as transparent as the College of Cardinals' method of picking a new pope in Rome. Instead of watching for color-coded smoke signals from the Vatican, a waiting labor movement has been deciphering messages, from one side or the other, as they get posted on the Internet.

After 28 years as an organizer and strategist for the Communications Workers of America, embedded with organized labor, as he puts it, Steve Early is "redeployed" as the journalist, writer and intellectual he has always been. Emphasis on writer and intellectual. These essays on labor history, strategy and union politics are polished and graceful reviews of dozens of books over the last eleven years. The pleasures of Early as a writer stem in part from his never having had to face the anonymous edge-effacing, blandness-generating torture chamber of academic so-called peer review – his opinions have edges and his humor has a delightful snarkiness. Watch out professors: his distaste for academic "sideline coaching" comes through quite pointedly. The paradox is of course the fact that Early is an omnivorous reader of all things labor, including obscure history tomes from academic presses.

The resulting essays are a remarkable feat of writing and editing. From 38 published pieces Early has stitched together a totally coherent *tour d'horizon* of recent scholarship and commentary on labor history, reflections on the movements of the 1960s, case studies of strikes and organizing campaigns, and at the back end an almost up-to-date look at the current civil wars in the labor movement. For an overview of scholarship and current issues facing the labor movement, the virtue of this book as a starting point is not only that it is an accessible and fun read, but that it has a consistent point of view which is both noble and revealing as a perspective on labor studies.

Put simply, Early examines labor movements and unions from the perspective of worker self-governance and union democracy. Identifying with what one SEIU staffer dismissively referred to as that “Labor Notes crowd,” Early shows little use for top-down labor “generalissimos” or staff-driven (as distinct from member-driven) organizing campaigns. An Early passage about double-dipping high-six-figure pay for aging union leaders has enough acid to take the paint right off a Town Car. (See, his style is contagious.)

Early is a master of the form of the literary review – he discusses things that interest him using the books under review to help him make his point.

The first group of essays addresses twentieth century labor activists or organizations that, Early notes, formed the historical backdrop for the “new” leftists of the 60s and 70s who entered the labor movement. A review of writings by and about labor journalists Eva Valesh and Mary Heaton Vorse gives Early a podium from which he mourns the loss of labor journalism, leaving a gap not filled by what he calls the “house organs” and “vanity press” of the unions’ own publications. By bringing us – in some detail – the story of these early twentieth century writers on labor affairs, Early reminds us of the political complexity of events now iconic among the slim ranks of labor-oriented intellectuals. The cleavage between the socialist-minded workers in the 1909 “Revolt of the Twenty Thousand” shirtwaist workers and their upper-class supporters was a (downward) turning point in the career of Valesh. Early’s discussion of Vorse’s writing about the Lawrence “Bread and Roses” strike reminds us of the lack of support the mainstream unions gave to the immigrant workers there in 1912.

While Early has strong (and strongly negative) perspectives on Andy Stern’s “Purple Army” he is not sectarian in his treatment of . . .sectarians – though he can’t resist the telling descriptor of some former members of the 60s–70s New Communist Movements as “recovering sectarians.” His look back on movement history, as his look forward to union strategy, is firmly oriented to building “durable rank-and-file” organizations in unions or industries.

Reading Early as he writes his way through the books of the last decade one realizes that the issue-polarization that visibly emerges in whatever passes for public discourse about the labor movement is at best the description of an iceberg from above the waterline, or at worst the perception of a fork in the road when one is confronted by a multiple-choice quiz.

In 1995, when John Sweeney was elected AFL-CIO President in the confederation's first contested election ever, the turn in the road was described as one between organizing and political action on one side, and contract-servicing unions on the other. Even then there was at least one other tendency in both camps of union types: the old "Labor Notes crowd" of union democrats who believe workers should run their own unions, and that movement-building begins with informed members.

But the AFL-CIO is not one big union: it is a confederacy with almost no power over its 56 affiliates. By 2005 Sweeney's own SEIU, now headed by Andy Stern, and five other unions, including UNITE-HERE headed by Bruce Raynor and John Wilhelm, left the AFL-CIO to form Change to Win (CTW). The dichotomy was once again posed as investing in organizing vs an inability to move the clumsy federation. CTW argued that more money should be spent on organizing and less on politics – poignantly reflecting the disaster of the 1994 Congressional elections. That turned out to be merely rhetorical. Change to Win constituents did not have great organizing successes (outside of the public sector where the rules of the game are quite different than in the private sector) and though the AFL-CIO continued to invest in electoral politics, Stern's SEIU outspent all non-party committees in the 2008 election cycle – \$27 million on "independent" expenditures for Obama. For context, the next largest non-party contributor was the National Rifle Association at \$17 million. The *internal* function that Stern spent the big bucks on was combating internal dissent and external competition among neighboring unions.

In the period before the split from the AFL-CIO, an influential working paper was circulated in and around SEIU by Stephen Lerner. This paper and subsequent articles argued that higher density (proportion of union workers in an industry/region) yields higher wages for all workers – like a drafting effect in auto or bike racing. Lerner also argued that this density can best be raised by fewer, larger unions with a minimum of competition, raiding, and duplication of functions between them. In a review of a book (by Vanessa Tait) critical of SEIU's failure to empower low-wage members, Early notes Lerner's contention that:

"The union's increased 'market share' has helped raise the living standards of many thousands of new members among the working poor." For many activists and academics, this record of success ends any debate about the best way for other unions to grow. Some observers do question whether the SEIU "organizing model" is readily transferable, however. They note that SEIU has, until now, had the singular advantage of operating mainly in the public

sector, among smaller private firms, or within health care and home care entities that rely on public funding – a ready-made environment for union political leverage, lobbying and deal-making. IBM, Toyota, Overnite, MCI, Microsoft, Wal-Mart, or even partially unionized General Electric operate in an entirely different league – as unions trying to organize them are reminded every day.

Against such adversaries, no amount of clever corporate campaigning, Justice for Janitors pageantry, or even craven political maneuvering – such as SEIU’s embrace of industry-backed “tort reform” that would restrict lawsuits against elder-abuse in California nursing homes – is likely to secure organizing rights or recognition anytime soon. In contrast, at the “for-profit” nursing homes that SEIU is now partnering with – to the dismay of California patient advocates – the union’s new “alliance” with management may indeed boost its “market share.”

The union density through union consolidation strategy had led SEIU to the creation of sector-wide or region-wide mega locals. For grassroots campaigners like Early a “local” of over 100,000 workers is not a school for democracy – it is the infrastructure of a bureaucratic behemoth.

Early had been feeding me his reviews by e-mail over the last few years, but it is only now, seeing them together in a flowing narrative that one realizes how contorted the labor scene has become. Having taken the largest unions out of the AFL-CIO, CTW’s one-time advocates of concentration and efficiency set about competing with their AFL-CIO counterparts. For example, SEIU has gone after public sector workers much to the chagrin of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Stern could not tolerate the dissent of one of his own local Presidents, Sal Rosselli of the California United Health Workers–West (a local of about 150,000 workers), who was a critic of his high-handed ways and soft contracts. Stern then put the UHW local in receivership. Rosselli, buoyed by the feisty support of local leaders and a passionate staff, formed a competing healthcare union in California and Stern – up until his retirement in 2010 – spent millions in a so far unsuccessful attempt to kill it in the courts and on decertification elections in California.

In the meantime the merger between the old garment unions (UNITE) and the hotel workers’ union (HERE) fell apart. Stern enticed Bruce Raynor of UNITE to come into SEIU, and John Wilhelm of HERE and Raynor/SEIU are engaged in one of the most bitter struggles in recent labor history.¹

1. As this article was going to press a lawsuit between UNITE HERE (Wilhelm) and Workers United-SEIU (Raynor) was announced – dividing assets in dispute.

Early is on top of all of this, and his clarity as a teacher is exceeded only by his clever turn of phrase and humor.

But praise is not enough, nor is grassroots local union democracy the universal solution to labor's woes. While Early is an exemplary internationalist and led his region of the Communications Workers of America in genuine solidarity with Latin American unionists, this book is not about the fundamental globalization of capital and the race to the bottom in global labor standards – the whip hand that lashes labor.

The specter that haunts the labor movement is global capitalism.

Industries where labor was strongest – auto, steel, and yes, garments – are the ones most globalized, where low-wage and exploited labor has been mobilized to compete with high-wage, high-benefit labor. The surviving unions in these sectors are but pale skeletal reflections of their former powerful presence. Weakened by this and by the steady erosion of labor law protections, and the political desertion of Democratic Presidents (Carter, Clinton, Obama), only in public sectors (e.g., teaching) has the labor movement increased or maintained density. This weakness makes global trade policy a plaything of neoliberal shades of difference, but it also means that the larger labor movement cannot prosecute its domestic agenda. The service sector unions do not have enough private sector penetration to carry the ball themselves. Moreover, many service sector jobs are themselves exportable (remember that call for computer support one night and where your help came from?).

Global capitalism will not be successfully confronted by a bureaucratic labor movement which fails to inspire and mobilize its members. But internal union democracy can't do the job itself.

A century ago workers were bereft of support from government and law, and they were subject to a regional race to the bottom, as employers threatened any advance in working conditions by moving or threatening to move to locations where law or unions were weaker. The move across the Hudson (cf. famous *New Yorker* cartoon, cover, looking West) was used to try to corral garment workers into submission.

The Progressive movement of middle-class reformers took up some of the key policy issues that workers then needed as a scaffold for full enfranchisement. These reformers had sometimes adversarial, sometimes collaborative relations to socialists, but they had a social agenda that called for the inclusion of the working class into the civic and political life of the republic. Most, if not all of the Progressives understood that working-class issues were central to the nation's moral and economic success. "The Social Question" of working-class inclusion was very much central to Jane Addams, and to Louis Brandeis and Florence

Kelley. When a factory with Kelley's National Consumer League's anti-sweatshop "White Label" was struck by unionists seeking better wages, a process began which eventually caused them to withdraw the white label: "Our position is obviously untenable as friends of labor," claimed the NCL, "if we persist in pushing our label as a rival to the label of the American Federation of Labor against the protests of union officials." Kelley's avatars among the reform-minded today have little or no understanding of or sympathy with unions.

What is continuous between the older Progressive movement and today's middle-class reform mentality is somewhat less attractive: it is sympathy for the victim. Compassion trumps justice; helping the poor trumps creating or saving jobs. Starving Africans trump preserving labor standards in the US garment industry.

In one (curiously) small passage Early discusses the seed of a solution. Jobs with Justice (JwJ), of which he is a prime supporter/founder, fosters solidarity among local unions regionally, and coalition with community organizations as well. Faith-based groups are regularly part of JwJ functions and call-outs. JwJ reaches out to individual supporters among the intelligentsia for help, e.g., in testimony on workers' rights issues. Writ larger and more ambitiously JwJ could broaden the coalition of activists who know and understand labor issues.

This book of essays will give readers a Contemporary Labor Movement 101 background. If only most texts were as well written or half as funny. (A line I can't resist reporting: about Change to Win [the break-away led by SEIU and Andy Stern] Early coyly writes: "some call it Change to Spin"). The next installment is in process. Early is finishing a book on "The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor: Birth of a New Workers Movement or Death Throes of The Old?" Start with *Embedded...*, then get "Civil Wars..." Then get to work.

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 in the new sweatshops* (2004)
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Carl Mirra, *The Admirable Radical: Staughton Lynd and Cold War Dissent, 1945-1970* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2010).

I enjoy opening my introductory History classes by telling the students, "I study the past because I am interested in the future."

Carl Mirra's careful intellectual biography, covering the first half of Staughton Lynd's adult life, reveals a scholar-activist who has constantly sought to bring the present with him into his investigations of the past, and – likewise – to bring the past with him as he seeks to envision a better future. Although this is a book about dissent and activism, its pages are populated by historians, including Howard Zinn (who wrote the Foreword), Jesse Lemisch, E.P. Thompson, C. Vann Woodward, Edmund Morgan, Eugene Genovese, John Morton Blum, and more. They didn't all share Lynd's views of history and politics, but they all linked activism with their own scholarly work.

Staughton Lynd recently turned 80. The present book supplements a recent collection of essays on his work, as well as memoirs by both Staughton and his wife Alice Lynd.² Viewing Lynd's work as a whole, one finds the links between past and present at every point. As Mirra argues in his introduction, these connections focus on the right of revolution among the oppressed (whether slaves and indentured servants in the eighteenth century or peasants in southern Mexico in the twenty-first century), the priority of human needs over property rights (from workers' quest for the eight-hour day in the 1880s to the struggle to keep steel mills open in the 1980s), and direct democracy as the foundation of freedom (from upstate New York small farmers' actions in the era of the American Revolution to rank-and-file steelworkers' demands to set policy for their own unions in the face of deindustrialization).

I can illustrate Lynd's drawing of such links from my own experience with him. In the early to mid-1990s, there was intense debate inside the American labor movement. Despite its size and resources, the AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions had been unable to prevent plant closings, capital flight, concessions, and the weakening of unions in the workplace. Union organizing campaigns were rarely succeeding, and elected officials were delivering little on their campaign promises. The debaters, engaging the specifics of the Hormel, *Chicago Tribune*, Staley, Caterpillar, and Detroit newspaper strikes, NAFTA, and the WTO, disagreed over how deep the problems went. Some contended that a new leadership group could turn things around, while others insisted that the recent crises reflected deep structural, organizational, and ideological problems. Staughton and a group

2. *From Here to There: The Staughton Lynd Reader* (New York: PM Press, 2010); Staughton and Alice Lynd, *Stepping Stones: Memoir of a Life Together* (Boston: Lexington Books, 2009); Staughton Lynd, *Living Inside Our Hope: A Steadfast Radical's Thoughts on Rebuilding the Movement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

of younger scholars, including me, were drawn to a similar debate in the labor movement in the early 1930s, as activists challenged the apparent inability of the AFL and its affiliates to mount an effective response to the Great Depression.

Staughton was a magnet for the eight of us, spread across the country, who had been drawn to the pre-CIO labor movement as a model for grassroots worker activism. Some of us knew each other; some did not. We had all been inspired by Lynd's ideas of local democracy and worker empowerment, and we knew that there was something about the current crisis of the labor movement that had steered us to explore workers' activism before the institutional and structural shifts occasioned on the one hand by the creation of the CIO and its industrial unions and, on the other, by the government-influenced apparatus initiated by the Supreme Court's legitimation of the National Labor Relations Act in 1937. Even though he insisted that he was not the "leader" of our project or the "editor" of our book, Staughton helped construct our framework out of the specifics of each our case studies, and he articulated it in a brilliant, lengthy introduction to the resulting book.³ We all realized that the past did not provide a tidy template for contemporary activism. We were especially aware of the persistence of racism and sexism, the difficulties of maintaining democracy while moving from the local to the national level, and the challenges workers face in drawing sweeping conclusions from their own experiences. The relationship between the past and present is rich, we learned, but it is also riddled with complexities.

In *The Admirable Radical*, Mirra shows us how the young Staughton Lynd developed his insights through a combination of reconstructing history and engaging in movements for social change. The narrative begins with Lynd's youthful quest for community, fraternity, and solidarity as the teen-aged son of progressive academics. At Harvard in the post-WWII years, he participated in a number of left - old left - organizations, which frustrated him even as it introduced him to Marxism and socialism. As US intervention in Korea reached a war level, he turned to Quakerism and pacifism. He sought conscientious objector status, but was drafted nonetheless and then given a dishonorable discharge (which would be changed to "honorable" in 1958). In 1954, Staughton and Alice moved to an intentional community in Macedonia, Georgia, where they explored the possibilities of building a new

3. *"We Are All Leaders": The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

world within the shell of the old. But the world was changing very fast, and they chose to throw themselves back into it.

In 1959 Staughton returned to academia, pursuing a Ph.D. in History at Columbia University. While debates about racism, civil rights, the Constitution, and the expansion of democracy were heating up, Staughton was drawn to research on the American Revolution, particularly the roles played by small, "yeoman" and tenant farmers in upstate New York, as class conflict within the colonies percolated along with conflict between the colonies and the British crown. His study challenged the dominant historical interpretations of the day, as his introduction of class and, particularly, the agency of non-elites, questioned our society's understanding of its own formative experience. His work inspired a cohort of new historians and dove-tailed with the burning issues of the rapidly growing civil rights movement. Staughton joined that movement as a professor at the historically black college, Spelman, as a participant in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and as the director, in 1964, of SNCC's Freedom Schools in Mississippi. His academic and activist work were linked by his search for grassroots empowerment, democracy, and community, whether in upstate New York in the 1770s or the Mississippi delta of the 1960s. Mirra's reconstruction of Lynd's scholarly and activist projects reveals how each drew from the other, strengthening both.

At the time, however, he came under fire from both directions. Lynd was discharged from Spelman because his activism unsettled the school's staid hierarchy, and he was marginalized in the civil rights movement as it turned toward Black Power in 1967. His determination to be true to his search for community, democracy, and popular empowerment, would lead Staughton to the exit doors of a succession of institutions, professions, political organizations, and even social movements - via blacklisting, loss of employment, and ostracism. But he continued his work, in whatever settings he could find, seeking and building community, teaching and empowering poor and working people, and conducting research which connected the past and the present. His later work would entail a shift from academia to the law, engagement with struggles for union democracy and against plant closings, and, later still, against privatized prisons, the carceral society, and the death penalty, and for prisoners' rights.

Throughout these shifts, Staughton's life and work continued to be informed by a clear vision: (1) the importance of understanding that the present had grown out of the past; (2) the centrality of human needs, democracy, and the right to make social change; (3) "accompaniment" as the mantra of the activist, to progress *with* others rather than at their

head; and (4) a responsibility to mentor the ensuing generations of scholars, activists, and scholar-activists, even if one is no longer operating from within an academic institution. I am one of many who have benefited from his mentorship, and, as I mentor others, I transmit the lessons he taught me.

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Al Sandine, *The Taming of the American Crowd: From Stamp Riots to Shopping Sprees* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009).

Early in this book Sandine gives a brief account of the Baltimore bank riots of 1835, in which politically connected bankers who had cannibalized the Bank of Maryland, making off with the savings of its depositors, were treated to a rude surprise by an angry mob of citizens braving gunfire to ransack and burn their homes – along with that of the Mayor who had colluded with them. In light of the baffling quiescence that gripped Americans in the face of similar government and finance-industry chicanery in 2008, Sandine’s narrative of the historical permutations of the American crowd is most timely.

This wide-ranging popular history examines the shifting role of the crowd from Colonial times to the present. Recovering many fascinating and little-remembered episodes, Sandine traces a somber downward trajectory of the role of mass action in the streets, with attention to a variety of gatherings ranging from demonstrations and marches to riots, strikes, lynch mobs, and carnivals. He argues that crowds, at their best, have been crucial to the collective struggles for rights, resources, and political agency, but that Americans’ abilities to mobilize crowds for democratic purposes have been virtually destroyed by elite manipulation, repressive policing, suburban dispersal, alienation, media spectacle, and consumerism. Though the book sacrifices depth for breadth, overlooks promising international crowd forms (particularly in the Global South), and falls short in drawing practical lessons, it recounts a wealth of illuminating and often inspiring episodes of popular struggle.

The first chapter argues that public gatherings have been crucial in communities’ struggles to defend their interests. It highlights a rash of Depression-era crowd actions in which people appropriated food from stores, defended homes threatened with eviction, and demanded jobs

at the factory gates. Sandine further argues that revelry has been a key vector of solidarity along class, ethnic, and neighborhood lines, outlining a history of public celebration running from the medieval carnival to the bacchanalia around nineteenth century July 4th celebrations, on through to the mass entertainment of Coney Island and the countercultural festivities of the 1960s. In the second chapter, he substantiates his argument about the role of the crowd with capsule histories of ten crowds which, he argues, "made history." He begins with the Athenian Assembly, then jumps ahead to the French and American Revolutions, the "Great Upheaval" of workers' struggles in 1877, the industrial strike waves of the 1930s, and the "ghetto eruptions" of the 1960s, with various stops along the way.

Having established the central import of crowds at various turning points in US and European history, Sandine turns his attention to crowds gathered for less noble purposes. Drawing on Gustave Le Bon's influential 1895 study *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, which popularized the notion of "crowd psychology," Sandine recounts in chapter 3 the "carnival air" among the thousands of participants and onlookers in the KKK-organized lynch mob that murdered two black youths in Marion, Indiana in 1930. He shows the careful planning and organization that went into the barbaric event: Klansmen handed out leaflets, posted street signs, and made advance announcements over PA systems.

Chapters 4–6 trace efforts by corporate and political elites to co-opt, create, and repress crowds. Sandine here charts the development of municipal regulations designed to prevent autonomous crowd activity and to harness crowd-energy for the pageantry of patriotism, militarism, commerce, and mainstream party politics. Drawing on the work of Thomas Spencer, he presents the amazing history of St. Louis's century-long tradition of the "Veiled Prophet" celebration, which began when elites and vigilantes paraded through the streets behind the police commissioner, who wielded an ax and bloody chopping block in commemoration of the violent breaking of the 1877 St Louis General Strike. Ranging at a heady pace over the history of May Day, soapbox speakers, the women's suffrage movement, Gay Pride marches, right-wing attacks on socialist, anti-war, and civil rights demonstrations, the Macy's Thanksgiving day parade, Coney Island, the World's Fair, Disneyland, mass media, and sporting events, Sandine argues that the arc of the American crowd has bent downward towards passivity, consumerism, and spectacle for spectacle's sake. Chapter 6 narrates the role of the police in enforcing this passivity, and the brutality with which they have repeatedly suppressed restive crowds.

The book continues with a meditation on the social trends that have accompanied the “taming” of US crowds since 1945, rehearsing a by-now familiar cultural studies script covering suburbanization and the death of downtown, car culture, shopping malls, and gentrification. In closing, Sandine reflects briefly on the role of technology in crowd behavior, touching refreshingly but hastily on crowd forms developed outside Europe and the US – in Argentina, Burma, and the Philippines – and musing over the possibilities of resurgence of the American crowd in the midst of the current economic crisis.

In all, Sandine offers refreshing glimpses of mass street actions that have shaped US history at crucial turning points, including several that have been largely forgotten. Given the inroads that Tea Party organizers have made in harnessing middle-class disaffection, Sandine’s reminders about episodes of racial violence, xenophobia, and militarism deserve serious attention.

The very eclecticism that makes this book an enjoyable read also accounts for its main weakness: Sandine makes little effort to categorize, analyze, or draw strategic or tactical lessons from the wealth of examples he puts forward. Without an effort to construct a rigorous typology of crowds, engage in careful comparative study, and connect crowd actions to their organizational, political, and economic contexts, these important histories are liable to remain a mere litany of ‘one damn riot after another.’

Another striking omission is lack of attention to the recent history of non-violent direct action and civil disobedience. The civil rights movement is mentioned only in passing, and the anti-nuclear movement is all but ignored. This history of mass action structured around participatory democracy, affinity groups and spokescouncils,⁴ puts the lie to LeBon’s notion of the pathological crowd. Sandine’s discussion of the anti-corporate-globalization movement that emerged out of the Seattle WTO blockade in 1999, which drew direct inspiration and lessons from the anti-nuclear movements of the 1970s and 80s, is relegated to the chapter on policing. This is perhaps in part because the resurgence in Seattle of creative crowd tactics – involving activist networks from all over the world – clashes with Sandine’s Eurocentric assumption that the crowd has been “tamed.” Sandine treats the cycle of street protests and blockades running from Seattle to Miami in 2003

4. See Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

more as an object lesson in police power than as a sign of a renewed potential for crowd action.⁵

Where Sandine cites examples of crowd actions outside the US, he largely restricts himself to European cases, with a few brief exceptions in the final chapter. Certainly it would be impossible to cover the history of crowds across the entire globe in a 200-page volume. But forms of mass action are disseminated internationally with increasing speed, and those who, like Sandine, hold out hope for a return of the crowd to its vital role in shaping history must increasingly look to developments around the globe: to the *plantones* of Oaxaca, the black blocs of Athens, the blockades of El Alto, the flash mobs of Tehran, and the *bandhs* of Kathmandu.

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José Saramago, *The Notebook*. Translated by Amanda Hopkinson and Daniel Hahn (London: Verso, 2010).

In September 2008, the Nobel Prize-winning Portuguese novelist, playwright and journalist, José Saramago, went online at the age of 85 and for the first time in his life began writing a blog. This encounter with what he called “the infinite page of the Internet” lasted until August 2009, not long before he fell ill and died. His enthusiasm about this form of social media and his own new role as a blogger is tangible in the collection of entries which have now been published in book form:

Is this the closest thing we have to citizen power? Are we more companionable when we write on the Internet? I have no answers; I am merely stating the questions. And I enjoy writing here now. I don't know whether it is more democratic, I only know that I feel just the same as the young man with the wild hair and the round-rimmed glasses, in his early twenties, who was asking me the questions. For a blog, no doubt. (72)

It is clear from the wide range of subjects covered in his blog – everything from childhood memories to world politics, literature and writing, utopia and the future of the Left – that this public electronic diary gave Saramago a new sense of freedom to reflect, discuss,

5. For insights based more on the movements themselves, see the magazine *Rolling Thunder*; also Kristian Williams, *Confrontations: Selected Journalism* (Tarantula Publishing, 2007).

digress, ask questions, both big and small, and try to answer some of them himself. In many ways, the collection contains Saramago's most overtly political statement of views. It remains a posthumous testament to a writer who devoted his life to literature, libertarian Communism and the cause of human enlightenment. As he says himself at one point:

I don't think I have ever divided my identity as a writer from my conscience as a citizen. I believe that where one goes, the other should go, too. I don't recall ever having written a single word that contradicted the political convictions I uphold, but that does not mean that I have ever placed literature at the service of my ideology. What it does mean, however, is that every word I write I seek to express the totality of the man I am. (228)

In this internet blog, that radical commitment to the cause of social liberation is given its clearest and most candidly personal expression.

Coming from a working-class Catholic background and living all of his life in Portugal and then Spain, one of Saramago's recurring preoccupations as a writer has been with the oppressive influence of the Catholic Church on the lives of ordinary people. This is also the theme for instance of his great iconoclastic novel about the Inquisition, *Baltasar & Blimunda* (1982). Being an atheist himself, Saramago fought a life-long battle against the earthly powers of Catholicism, a campaign that continues throughout his blog, very much in the critical tradition of Voltaire and the French *lumières*: against religious superstition, censorship and prejudice. In an entry entitled "God as a problem", Saramago writes for instance:

Hence, whether you like it or not, we have God as a problem, God as a rock in the middle of the road, God as a pretext for hatred, God as an agent of disunity [...] But let us at least discuss it. It is no good saying that killing in God's name makes God a killer. To those who kill in God's name God is not only the judge who will absolve them, he is also the powerful Father who in their minds used to provide the firewood for the *auto-da-fé* and now prepares and orders the planting of bombs. Let's discuss this invention, let's solve this problem, let's recognize at least that the problem does exist. Before we all go crazy. And from there on, who knows? Maybe that will be how we manage not to go on killing one another (41-2).

Saramago described himself as a radical pessimist, not least when it came to the capacity of the Left to make its voice heard in what he called this "age of lies", ushered in by George W. Bush, who he said used "the lie as a weapon, the lie as the advanced guard of tanks and cannons, the lie told over the ruins, over the corpses, over humanity's wretched and perpetually frustrated hopes" (7-8). At the same time, there is throughout the *Notebook* an irrepressible belief in the reason and intelligence of people to see through the spin and sham of politicians who seek only to promote the privilege and power of

the present system. The recent popular uprisings throughout the Middle East have confirmed in a most spectacular way Saramago's confidence in the courage and determination of ordinary people to fight back against their oppressors.

Many readers of *The Notebook* will of course be attracted to Saramago's personal reflections about fellow writers such as Carlos Fuentes, Jorge Luis Borges, Eduardo Galeano, Jorge Amado and Dario Fo. Or his wide-ranging political comments about the events in the news at the time: the election of Obama, Israel's brutal occupation of Gaza, the religious pronouncements of the new Pope, or the world economic crisis, which Saramago calls "a (financial) crime against humanity" (42). There are also many lovingly personal vignettes from his own childhood, which reveal the sort of deeply felt, working-class sensibility that came to inform his later novel-writing. Perhaps one short episode will suffice here – a moving tribute to his peasant grandfather's intimate relationship with the soil: "I think of my grandfather Jerónimo, who in his final hours went to bid farewell to the trees he had planted, embracing them and weeping because he knew he wouldn't see them again. It's a lesson worth learning" (67).

What shines through all of these entries, short or long, is a rage against injustice and longing for social change that inspired Saramago, even at this late stage in his life, to try to reach out in new ways to different categories of readers. This feeling of urgency is the red thread that links all of these internet reflections, combined with a realistic awareness of the obstacles facing any socially emancipatory struggle that seeks to connect the personal with the political. It is here in the carefully observed detail of everyday life that Saramago's particular blend of hard-earned wisdom and radical consciousness comes into its own. He returns for example on several occasions to the issue of domestic violence, which he sees not only as a problem that men need actively to address, but also as one that goes far beyond the private sphere of the family itself:

The violence that has always been exerted against women has turned the place of cohabitation (let us not call it a home) into a prison, an ideal space for daily humiliation, for regular beatings, for psychological cruelty as a tool of domination. It's women's problem, they say, but that is not true. The problem is men's. [...] Maybe a hundred thousand men, only men, no one but men, should demonstrate in the streets, while the women stand on the pavement throwing flowers at them – that might be the signal society needs to begin to fight this unbearable disgrace, from the inside, and without delay. And to make gender-based violence, whether fatal or not, one of our citizens' principal sorrows and concern. It's a dream, a duty. It could be more than just utopian (246–7).

Despite being mainly made up of occasional pieces, written almost on the spur of the moment, there is a clarity of language, an intellectual richness and a lifetime of radical commitment that characterize all of these personal meditations on both the state of the world and Saramago's own experience of it. For those who have yet to read any of the novels of José Saramago, this *Notebook* collection of his blog entries should make the perfect first acquaintance.

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Michael E. Brown, *The Historiography of Communism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

From David Harvey to Slavoj Žižek, Marxist thinkers have addressed the question of how to organize effectively against the most recent crisis in capitalism, which many agree will inflict greater devastation than the crisis of the 1930s. To this end, the Left must not only overcome deep-rooted anticommunism but must also free Marxism from the restrictions of institutionalized analytical discourse. For Michael Brown, the "radical discipline" of Marxism has been de-historicized by academic institutions. Marxist theory has been crippled by "the politics of textualization and the textualization of politics." How can the resulting paralysis be surmounted?

Brown calls for a re-contextualizing of the political. In *The Historiography of Communism*, he reflects on how the "Left" has been established as a historical category. He engages with the logic and "persistence" of anticommunism that has marginalized and complicated questions of radical political agency. Moving from the epistemological limits of the "logic of history" to the organizational and institutional dimensions of US anticommunism and to the Left's discourse of crisis, Brown subjects the varying and complex debates within the historiography of Communism to a rigorous Marxist critique. At the same time, he reveals the "antidiscursive ways" in which the Left is continually reconstructed within the perspectives of the political Right and capitalist hegemony, especially in the post-Soviet period in which the logic of anticommunism has strengthened its grip:

As the concrete referents of anticommunism disappear, the generalization of its logic operates as a kind of latency, always anticipating an object but indifferent

to specific content: It is available for any particular crisis, any criticism of policy, and any negative response to that policy. It is all the more powerful when combined with pre-existing exclusionary ideologies, with nationalism, and with the longstanding discourse of the obligations of empire, and it is available to justify whatever invasions are undertaken in the name of the nation. (39)

Brown's general emphasis on the systemic and constant substantiation of anticommunist discourse can also be understood as a reaction on his part to the prevalence of postmodernist, post-Marxist, and post-structuralist theories, which have hitherto put formalistic constraints on revolutionary Communism and the possibilities of alternative models of social relations.

Brown begins by examining the work of E.P. Thompson, whose writing displays the link between "society" and "history" – an essential component to the epistemological logic of historiography. Focusing on what Brown calls Thompson's insistence on "the difference between history as a human accomplishment (the dynamic of society) and history as a temporally organized and casually determined array of facts," Brown brackets the dialectical form in Thompson's writing to demonstrate what he refers to as the "historicity of historical study itself," which makes Thompson's work part of the recently fashionable "people's history" model (47, 66). By challenging the organizational, institutional, and theoretical appropriations of historical analysis and of the science of social engagement, he seeks to "resuscitate" the lost inscriptions of revolutionary Communist praxis.

Chapters 3 and 4 address the "issues" of Communist historiography and what he terms the "critical attitudes" that emerge from the writing of Leftist history. Focusing on the "textualization" of American Communism through a dialectical analysis of writing and its effect as discourse, Brown argues that the constructive dimensions of the socialist project have been undermined by "the disproportional logic of writing in order to settle accounts," or what he sees as the reproduction of "an image of the Left that is mechanistic and the design of appetite rather than one of conviction and responsiveness to situations" (86, 93). In the context of systemic anticommunism and the mystification of radical politics in general, Brown's argument is that the "orthodox" histories of the Left, which emphasize the structural and organizational principles of Communism, are confined by the framework of capitalist social relations and have become part of what he sees as the inevitability of systemic anticommunist attitudes, especially in the US. In Chapter 4 Brown offers suggestions on how to "rewrite" such historiographies by implementing aspects of Thompson's work, which spotlights the collectivity and inclusiveness of radical politics, or the

“communicative and self-reflective” elements by which Communism as a social movement is structured.

Chapter 5 offers a valuable critique of the academic Marxism of the 1960s in which class struggle became subordinate to ideology and culture. Brown strikes at the core of the post-Marxist fixation on uprooting “master narratives” and on what he calls “the overwhelming domination of individuals by structures of unmanageable hegemonies” (137). It is in this chapter as well that Brown offers a unique “reading” of Marx’s *Capital*, highlighting its epistemological and pedagogical moments which can be used to “do the work” of reconstructing radical politics in the contemporary period. With this reconstructive project in mind, the last sections of Brown’s book are dedicated to the discourse of crisis, referring both to the current crisis in capitalism and to the historic and systemic crisis of the Left. Brown argues that the contemporary strategies of an encompassing Left must include a materialist analysis of globalization, reflective of the increasing threat of inter-imperialist rivalry among the capitalist powers, while also offering organizational models embedded in history that can help recreate the possibilities of socialist experience now. In his words,

The answer must emphasize the volatile continuity of a certain situation, namely capital. It must emphasize the varieties of ways, or processes, in which that situation has been realized as a historic one through various forms of development as a project, and through equally various movements of opposition, conflicts at one or another site of capitalist development, and an even course of struggle that tends always, despite itself, to reach beyond the momentary confines of state, nation, and what is now called “tradition.” (200)

While the theoretical scope of his scholarship can be overwhelming at times, Brown provides a stimulating, insightful, and energetic assessment of leftist thought by engaging the structural aporias that have determined the “writing” of Communist historiography. His recognition of the Left’s theoretical limits in the context of the current crisis is much needed in order to overcome the aversion to radical alternatives and thereby offer real hope for change to millions who continually bear the weight capitalist domination, from Afghanistan to Haiti to the South Bronx, and beyond.

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Antonio A. Santucci, *Antonio Gramsci* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010).

Antonio Gramsci has long been regarded as one of the most creative political theorists since Karl Marx. In the social sciences and in Marxist circles, Gramsci's writings prefigured modern-day discussions of topics such as uneven development, ideological hegemony and contradictory consciousness, class consciousness and false consciousness in late capitalism, the importance of society and culture in impeding or fomenting social change, and the connection between theoretical work and political activity.

However, Gramsci's work remains marginal in academe, largely because he was an Italian communist leader and thus generally off limits to apolitical social scientists, and also because he produced no single definitive text that pulls together all his strands of thought. Gramsci has much to say to contemporary political scientists, sociologists, and others in the social sciences and humanities, as well as to activists in social movements. Yet his work has not been widely incorporated into the mainstream. Even in graduate courses in classical social theory, Gramsci's work is often omitted from the curriculum.

Gramsci's contributions are regarded as crucial to many Marxist and neo-Marxist thinkers. More recently, however, he has come under attack by anarchists who have challenged his focus on capturing state power, and for his Leninist bent. These critics have declared Gramsci dead. Like Marx, however, Gramsci does not seem that easy to do away with because his work contains rich insights that are pertinent to understanding the dynamics of a crisis-ridden capitalist system.

Monthly Review's recent publication of the late Antonio Santucci's volume on Gramsci is an invaluable addition to the treatment of Gramsci's work, and serves as a reminder of the prescience of his thought. Santucci is particularly adept in grounding Gramsci's writing in its political context and in identifying the transcendent concepts and theoretical insights that make Gramsci's work germane to the present era.

Rendering Gramsci's intellectual contributions is a challenge given the conditions under which he worked. As an Italian communist leader and thinker continually hounded by a repressive state, and later as a prisoner of the state, Gramsci's writing was out of necessity fragmented and contemporaneous. For a good part of his life he lacked the resources and the environment to polish his work. Santucci, however, is more than up to the task of presenting Gramsci's work as a coherent whole and connecting it to its larger setting.

Santucci's great triumph is his ability to weave together Gramsci's political life with his writing in a fascinating account which allows the reader to better understand the political, social and personal realities that shaped Gramsci's thinking. In the part of the book which covers Gramsci's life before imprisonment, Santucci dramatically captures how Gramsci combined theory and praxis. The author tracks Gramsci's thinking in response to internal party struggles and the external influences of the international communist movement to produce an engaging case study in the sociology of knowledge and political sociology. The reader is placed right in the middle of the political struggles in Italy, and is able to witness how Gramsci's views were modified by a complex social and political environment.

Santucci is especially good at pointing out the continuity in Gramsci's thought while also emphasizing how, as a political leader and editor of the party's newspaper, he had to take changes in social relations into consideration. The capacity to be reflective and to critically examine Marxist theory is one of the strengths of Gramsci's approach. The author also challenges the view advanced by some of Gramsci's critics who see him as merely a party functionary, and who derisively call him "the last Leninist."

Gramsci makes a genuinely original contribution to Marxist tradition in his writings on the concept of hegemony, the philosophy of praxis, the Southern question, and the search for a modern Prince. Santucci does an excellent job of debunking the notion that there is a split in Gramsci's writing before and after imprisonment. He also persuasively argues that Gramsci's work is classic and is truly original because of his intense engagement with politics. As the author suggests, Gramsci, like Marx, constantly tried to integrate theory and political activity, which accounts for the treasure trove of insights found in his *Prison Notebooks*.

The portrait of Gramsci which emerges is developed over the course of several chapters covering Gramsci's political writings, letters from prison, and his prison notebooks. This is followed by an important chapter entitled "End of the Century Gramsci," which bears witness to his continued relevance, while stopping short of canonizing his work.

What makes Gramsci fascinating even today is his resistance to dogmatic approaches to Marxist thought, and his insistence that the analysis of society and culture is an integral part of developing a political economy which can guide praxis. Gramsci's dynamic conception of hegemony, conceived not as one-sided domination, but rather dialectically, offers what is arguably the best understanding of class

consciousness or the lack of it in late capitalism. Santucci is able to ground Gramsci's theoretical work in the concrete problems Gramsci confronted as a party leader, prisoner, and intellectual. In doing so, Santucci helps us overcome the tendency to pigeon-hole Gramsci, and makes possible a deeper appreciation of his life and work.

There are many on both the right and the anarchist left who seek to bury Gramsci and to caricature his work. This is certainly not unusual for critics of capitalism, as Marx's ideas have frequently been misrepresented, and even declared dead at times. Gramsci's work is not well known in many academic circles, and mainstream social scientists who have encountered his work tend to label him as a narrow Communist thinker of very marginal interest to contemporary social thought. But for people who have actually read Gramsci and studied some of the crucial secondary sources on him, it is apparent that his theoretical insights continue to provide a useful framework for understanding the present era.

Since the late 1990s, and especially after the crash of 2007, Marx's ideas have been revived. This is true even among mainstream thinkers, who have generally been unable to provide a coherent explanation of the current capitalist crisis. The same might be said of Gramsci's legacy, as his work (especially his notion of contradictory consciousness and his concept of hegemony) provide one of the keys to understanding a capitalist system which is experiencing its most serious crisis in decades.

Santucci's small book argues for Gramsci's significance in a lively and engaging way. The author deserves much credit for reviving Gramsci's ideas and situating them in their appropriate political milieu. The philosophy of praxis to which Gramsci devoted his life provides a theoretical linchpin to activists and social theorists alike as they engage in the on-going struggle to understand capitalist social relations and build opposition to capitalist hegemony.

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John Gerassi, editor and translator, *Talking with Sartre: Conversations and Debates* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

From the imaginary "crabs" which haunted him in his earlier years, to his belief that the US was more capable of starting a nuclear war than the Soviet Union, these conversations with Sartre by John

Gerassi attempt to pin down the elusive philosopher, writer and political activist. Between 1970 and 1974, Gerassi, who knew Sartre from the time he was a child, talked with Sartre about a wide variety of topics including how he became politicized, the French resistance, the subsequent Cold War conflict between the US and the Soviet Union, and his resistance to colonialism in Asia, Africa and Latin America. And yet through all these conversations with Gerassi we only catch glimpses of how Sartre's philosophical ideas, his personal life and his political activism catalyzed each other. It is up to the readers of this book to develop their own insights into the confluence of these elements. I would have wanted Gerassi to provide us with some direction to make this task easier. Gerassi's questions about Sartre's literary ambitions, his education, and his attitude toward the Resistance and to French left politics after 1968 begin the conversations promisingly, but do not ultimately satisfy me with the insights they provide. Perhaps the closeness of the two men blunted the search between them for a deeper understanding. Gerassi's biography in dialogue is somewhat scatter-shot; many of Sartre's answers to his questions only hint at the complexity of the ideas and situations he is responding to. Sartre, a formidable intellectual, emerges from these exchanges as a combative person, prone to self-doubt, adept at deflecting questions that don't interest him, but at times willing to change his views.

In *Talking with Sartre* Gerassi gets Sartre to briefly discuss his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. From the effort to focus on individual self-definition in *Being and Nothingness* to his effort at reconciling Marxism and Existentialism in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, we see Sartre move from a philosophy of individualism to one which he sought to describe the collective connection of individuals in an ongoing dialectical interaction. Gerassi offers an illuminating example of a coming together, which Sartre applauds, in his story of a group of alienated workers who commandeer an "out of service" New York City bus to take them individually to their destinations. In the process, the passengers bond and "a whole new conception of life" is born. Sartre sees this as a wonderful collective example similar to that of the Cultural Revolution in China: "They believe that people must make all decisions that affect their lives" (95). But Gerassi does not press Sartre to extend the range of examples.

Under his rubric of self-actualization, freedom of choice is paramount for Sartre. As he tells Gerassi, "We were never as free as during the [Nazi] occupation," in that "we had very clearly defined choices to fight back one way or another or to collaborate. In those times our freedom defined our choices perfectly" (265). Gerassi

characterizes Sartre as an anarchist and Sartre replies: "You have to understand my anarchism, as you call it, was really an expression of freedom...the freedom of a writer" (45).

Sartre discusses his falling out with Camus occasioned by Francis Jeanson's caustic review of *The Rebel* in *Les Temps Modernes*, claiming that he did not edit a word of Jeanson's text. It is disingenuous of Sartre to imply, however, that he had nothing to do with generating the review. Camus addressed his rebuttal to "Monsieur le directeur des *Temps Modernes*," and Sartre said he had to answer, "and that destroyed our friendship." Gerassi comments: "It was a first rate response. It made the point so well, without saying it, that we are determined by what we do. Camus, by not taking sides on the Algerian question, was therefore, in my mind, pro-French Algeria, opposed to independence" (68). But was Sartre getting back at Camus for his intransigent moral stance on other issues, for instance the internal terror perpetrated by the Soviet Union which he strongly focuses on in *The Rebel*, which Sartre felt was undermined by his not taking a clear cut position for Algerian independence? I believe there is more to this issue than Gerassi chooses to unveil.

When Gerassi read from the book and answered questions at Revolution Books in New York in December 2009, he was asked to talk more about the differences between Sartre and Camus. He pointed to Camus's Sisyphus who pushes the rock up the hill again and again, repeating the same action though it is absurd. He said that Sartre, by contrast, would try to do something and, if it failed, would try another approach. For instance, he supported the communist Soviet Union over the capitalistic western nations during the Cold War in spite of the terrors of the Gulag which he knew. At that time, Sartre rejected the idea of a moral judgment in regard to the terror of the Soviet state. Camus responded: "At the world peace conference (organized by the Soviet Union) where you spoke so eloquently, the doves perched on the gallows." Sartre saw the Soviet Union as the lesser of two evils, a country, which economically and militarily could not afford to start an atomic war. He said the United States was more likely to start a nuclear war against the Soviet Union and felt he had to choose between the two sides in the Cold War, and did. Several years later he changed his views. In *The Ghost of Stalin*, he severely criticized the Soviets for their suppression of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, and he subsequently denounced their 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Gerassi prods Sartre to talk about May 1968. His responses are probably the most interesting part of the book. Sartre was one of the

few French intellectuals to support the student rebellion against De Gaulle's government and its hegemonic policies. Many of the other intellectuals of Sartre's generation were put off by the anarchistic activities of the students – their taking over the universities and their militant marches through the streets of Paris. When Sartre attempted to speak to the students he was booed by them as were other intellectuals. Unlike the others, however, Sartre came out in support of the student rebellion. But when the GP (Gauche Prolétarienne), made up of students and workers, passed up an opportunity to take power, preferring to remain a grassroots opposition, Sartre was disillusioned and withdrew his support.

Gerassi sometimes tries to highlight differences between himself and Sartre even though he agrees with Sartre on most issues. Sartre's idea of "man's project," the existential creation of the self by the individual, seems to clash with his Marxist analysis of dialectical class struggle and the alienation of individual workers from their jobs. On this issue highlighted by Gerassi, Sartre concedes a major point about his effort to link Marxism and Existentialism which Gerassi had challenged years before, when he was a university student. Sartre says: "To the amazement of all assembled, you ended up saying: Impossible, you cannot link Marxism with the Existentialist notion of 'project,' and went on to explain why. You were right. I never did" (44).

In their last interview in November 1974, six years before his death, Sartre tells Gerassi: "Action is what carries life, only action. I cannot do anything against the given; that is my human condition. The alienation I can and must fight.... And to dealienate my life must be as part of a collective" (268). Sartre's belief that the individual writer must be actively engaged in society and work collectively for change is clearly manifest in this statement.

Gerassi's *Talking with Sartre* is an uneven but provocative trip through the mind and life of one of the most important intellectual figures of the past century. It encourages us to read (or reread) Sartre's own writings to get a more complete picture of his ideas in relation to his personal experiences. His dictum that "existence is prior to essence" – that each individual is responsible for his or her actions – is as important today as when he first articulated it.

Existentialism deals with human interactions and is not a cold calculating prescription for moral correctness. Sartre is not just an Olympian philosopher, but a thinker who attempted to bring philosophical discourse into our everyday society through his plays, stories and philosophical studies. This agenda is reflected in his conversations with

Gerassi. Thought and praxis came together in Sartre's ongoing search to live an authentic life.

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Michael A. Lebowitz, *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*
(Monthly Review Press, 2010)

Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution has been blazing the path to a twenty-first century socialism, a socialism that puts in first place human development rather than development of the forces of production or bringing them under state control. This has required a renovation of the Marxist tradition, a task undertaken by philosopher István Mészáros, whose thinking has influenced Hugo Chávez. But the popular exposition of these ideas comes from economist Michael A. Lebowitz. In his earlier *Build It Now*, and even more clearly in the present book, Lebowitz has made available to a wide public an accessible systematic presentation of the philosophic principles of the socialist alternative emerging in Latin America.

Since his retirement from Simon Fraser University, Lebowitz has taken up residence in Venezuela where he has been a close observer of political and economic developments as well as an adviser to Hugo Chávez. There he is associated with the Centro Internacional Miranda research institute. While his views on building socialism are informed by the Venezuelan experience, they are much more general in scope. Coming from a critique of the Soviet model and the Yugoslav system of market self-management (the subject of a promised book *Studies in the Development of Socialism*), Lebowitz recovers the core of the socialist vision: a society that fosters the full development of human capacities through revolutionary practice, i.e. the "coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change."

Socialism is a process that links human development and practice. Marx understood that in labor the worker not only transforms the material world, but also himself. The same dialectical relationship applies not only in the workplace but also in the sphere of political and economic struggle. So the key to human development is a society that maximizes the opportunities for active participation in

all aspects of life, a society that fosters democracy, participation, and protagonism. Lebowitz argues that this is the premise for Marx's critique in *Capital*. It is precisely because under capitalism labor is alienated that our products appear as an alien power that rule over us rather than as creations in which we can recognize ourselves and develop our human capacities.

Humans are social beings, but capitalism blocks a realization of our species being. While it replaces individual labor with social labor, it does this under the control of another, thereby denying the possibility of solidarity among associated workers. As Marx pointed out, it is only "when the worker cooperates in a planned way with others [that] he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species." Full human development requires conscious collective decision making. It requires worker self-management.

But it requires more than this. It requires what Lebowitz calls a solidaritarian society. If worker cooperatives operate on the basis of common self-interest and relate to other cooperatives through market relations, then they simply become collective capitalists. This was the fate of Yugoslavian self-management. A solidaritarian society goes further. Cooperatives must themselves cooperate. Quoting Marx on the Paris Commune, "United cooperative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus taking it under their common control."

Socialism as an organic system rests on the combination of social property, social production, and satisfaction of social needs – what Hugo Chávez calls the elementary triangle of socialism. These are interdependent in that "without production for social needs, no real social property; without social property, no worker decision making oriented towards society's needs; without worker decision making, no transformation of people and their needs" (129). Once a socialist mode of production is established, socialism reproduces itself and is irreversible because each leg of the triangle sustains the others. But until that point is reached it is threatened by the established organic system of capitalism, even though it might be in crisis. Each is struggling to survive. For this reason, workers need state power (not the old hierarchical state but a truly democratic state) that can impose a mode of socialist regulation that will nurture the developing socialist triangle.

In his earlier book on the Bolivarian Revolution, *Build It Now!*, Lebowitz enjoins us to do just that where "a government representing workers has been elected but the balance of forces favors capital." Such is the situation in Venezuela. What needs to be done in such a case is use state power to develop workers' councils and communal councils through which popular classes can participate in making decisions on

those matters that affect their lives, and thereby themselves be transformed into social actors. These are the cells of a new society, the basis of a new socialist state. Even in their embryonic form these cells represent “*despotic inroads on the rights of capitalist property*” (136) and will be resisted accordingly by capital (e.g. with a capitalist strike). It is in this struggle that workers are radicalized. The revolutionary state has created the conditions for the mobilization of people against capital.

A weak point in Lebowitz’s argument arises when he tries to conceptualize how these self-managed cells can link together cooperatively so as to promote the common good. He wants to avoid any integration from above by an overarching state because this substitutes for the democratic participation that educates people. Further, unlike many socialists today, he does not want to rely on markets to coordinate the exchange of goods because markets are based on self-interest rather than the needs of others for human development. Indeed, Lebowitz wants to see the exchange of use values between producing collectives, without prices attached to them. As he says, “the socialist alternative is to *de-commodify. Everything.*” (146) His claim that this can be done from the bottom up seems utopian. More feasible would be for the state to expand the range of free goods available for human development – to expand the commons – thereby promoting an acceptance of these distribution relations as self-evident natural laws.

The basic strategy for revolutionary change in a situation like that of Venezuela is to use the old state, now in the hands of revolutionaries, to nurture the cells of a new state below. One wishes Lebowitz had developed more fully his assessment of this strategy. In my assessment, whereas in Cuba it took a revolution to create a socialist state, in Venezuela an attempt is being made to create the revolution within the old bourgeois state. More precisely, sections of the state, led by Hugo Chávez, are trying to transform civil society, bringing the popular classes into the structure of governance, even against the opposition of sectors of the old state and civil society. This is a complex situation whose outcome is not yet certain. The domestic strategy of the Bolivarian Revolution is to build alternative political and economic institutions parallel to the still existing bourgeois institutions, gradually increasing their strength to create a situation of dual power.

In the political realm communal councils are being created at the neighborhood level. By being able to set priorities based on community need, participants are educated to a new kind of political role. While the resources come from the state, officials are not always responsive – even some of those who wear the red shirts of the revolution.

There are those in the administrative apparatus of government who are still wedded to bourgeois ways of thinking and customary bureaucratic prerogatives and procedures. The community councils are an effort to bypass the state apparatus and local officials by putting decision-making power in the hands of people at the grassroots. Similarly, the promotion of worker cooperatives is planting the seed of a solidarity economy parallel to the existing capitalist economy. As part of an endogenous development strategy, cooperatives seek to build from those at the bottom of society, thereby incorporating the weakest as members of a national economy.

The terrain of civil society is always essentially contested territory. It is composed of a multiplicity of classes and groups with varying values and often competing, even antagonistic interests. But sometimes a class or group will project itself as representing the common good. If successful in winning sufficient support from other sectors of civil society to achieve hegemony, it can then claim to speak for the nation as a whole. For a long time now in the US, capital has enjoyed such a hegemonic position. So too in Venezuela. Even so, other class interests continue to contend within civil society. It is such popular forces that the Bolivarian Revolution seeks to strengthen, challenging the long standing hegemony of capital.

While Lebowitz might not disagree with the above assessment, one wishes he had spelled out more fully the concrete realities of making revolution in a country like Venezuela. Although the Venezuelan situation is unique, it has lessons for popular forces elsewhere in Latin America as bourgeois states come into their hands – a prospect made more likely by the exhaustion of neoliberal globalization. The vision of socialism as real human development inspires social change in the countries to our south. If only it would be so in the United States.

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Martin Carnoy, *Cuba's Academic Advantage* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007).

Over the past thirty years, when researchers and educators visited classrooms in Cuba and in other countries, Cuban pupils in every grade seemed to know much more math and seemed to read better. In the late 1990s, an international

organization, UNESCO, tested pupils in thirteen Latin American countries. What researchers and educators had believed for years about Cubans was confirmed. (48)

When people defend and praise Cuba's accomplishments under socialism, what is frequently mentioned is healthcare and education. But specifics are usually lacking to explain the achievements in education. This volume helps fill that void. Written by an education professor at Stanford, who is apparently not a socialist, it employs standard educational theory to analyze the reasons behind Cuba's success in primary and lower secondary school education. Carnoy compares Cuba's education system with those of Brazil and Chile in terms of performance, techniques and results. He visited schools in rural as well as urban areas. The results of the study indicate not only that Cuba outshines the other two countries in all categories, but also that there is little difference in Cuba between urban and rural schools and between schools in poorer and wealthier districts, and that the elite Chilean private schools provide the closest match to the Cuban schools. Much of Cuba's success can be directly attributed to socialism.

Cuba's educational reforms were initiated in the 1960s, beginning with "top-down mobilizations implemented islandwide," including the massive literacy campaign, expansion of secondary schools, curricular reforms, and lowering of class size. By the end of the decade, "universal tenth-grade education had been reached. A massive effort was made in the 1960s to *equalize* Cuban education in urban and rural areas and among urban neighborhoods" (29). Teaching became a highly regarded profession and a teacher-training school was created.

Carnoy also notes at the outset that the Brazilian and Chilean social structures are much more unequal than Cuba's, and that, for example in Brazil, "children in low-income regions go to schools with far fewer resources than are found in schools of more affluent areas" (35). Cuban schools are superior in classroom physical conditions, materials and textbooks available, and class size (20 in grades 1-6). All Cuban schools visited had computers, computer software, and a computer specialist. Since in socialism the state is also involved in healthcare and other social services, "families trust in the state's ability to produce high-quality education for all" (53f). Furthermore, poor children in Brazil and Chile are more likely to be sick, hungry and homeless. Cuban children have little access to "drugs, gangs, child prostitution and child labor." As a result there is far less absenteeism among children and teachers in Cuba (a chronic problem in developing countries), and there are fewer incidents of violence in the classrooms (35f, 67).

In Cuba the role of the state in guiding children's lives is greater. The schools, families, and municipalities share responsibility for a child's academic progress. Children stay with the same teacher through the sixth grade, which means that the teachers know their students and their families well. Other factors include an eight-hour school day. The ability of teachers to become well acquainted with their students is enhanced because people in Cuba do not change jobs and/or move frequently. If a student is absent for a few days or is having difficulties learning, the teacher will visit the family. "A principal of a primary school with 400-600 pupils could name every child with learning difficulties and the steps that were being taken to help the child..." (107).

Cuban students are also stimulated to attend school since it can lead to a white-collar job, and "Cuban children from less-educated families have much greater opportunity to succeed academically than their counterparts in Brazil and Chile" (39, 43). Since Cuban parents are more likely to be educated, their expectations are higher. "It is much easier for a teacher to deliver high-quality education in a society where essentially all children come to school at the 'right' age and are well nourished, where educational success is believed to be important by most families, and where families consider the teachers and the school to be dedicated to high-quality education for their children" (111).

The overall quality of those who enter the teaching profession in Cuba is high because most jobs outside of teaching do not pay better. A higher percentage of teachers in Cuba are university graduates. Teacher training is centrally controlled, and is based on the education philosophies of Vygotsky, Makarenko, and Dewey. Teachers are well versed in the curriculum, particularly in math, which "is more focused on teaching well a limited set of skills than covering a lot of material" (87). What stands out in Cuba is the intense and extensive teacher supervision and guidance, especially for new teachers. "Practice, not theory, is at the center of their teachers' education" (94).

Beyond teachers' initial education, most teacher training takes place on the job, where new teachers are closely mentored by experienced teachers and school principals and vice principals. The job of these supervisors is *defined* specifically as ensuring that teachers in their school are teaching the required curriculum effectively and that students are learning it. (83)

In comparison with Chile and Brazil, Cuba is much more efficient in classroom management, because of much smaller class size with less time spent in interruptions and transitions. The emphasis is on problem-solving by individual students. Cuban students were very

involved in the lessons and showed few signs of being bored. There is a high level of discipline. Every student's work was checked. Students were asked to explain their answers and correct other students. Superior teacher content knowledge also helps explain the more demanding cognitive skill content of the lessons.

Cuban primary and early secondary education for all students is superior to Chilean and Brazilian, where students are far more segregated economically and socially. Thus, Cuba is on track towards fulfilling the socialist goals of educating all children together, in the context of protecting the rights of all children. It also destroys the myth that children of all economic and social backgrounds cannot be educated. We now have a better understanding as to some of the reasons why.

The only criticism I have of this well-written and well-documented study pertains to a few unsubstantiated remarks implying that a tradeoff for better schools in Cuba is a lack of political liberties. Carnoy writes, "Strict government social controls are not good for individual *adult* liberties, but they do assure that lower-income children live in crime-free environments, are able to study in classrooms with few student-initiated disturbances, and attend schools that are more socially mixed. . . . Chile and Brazil - especially Brazil - have much more political freedom for adults and much more inequality, poverty, crime and greater numbers of street children" (142, 144; Carnoy's emphasis).

These comments are not part of Carnoy's research. After detailed analysis focusing on Cuba's educational system, it seems out of place to just assert that people in Cuba lack political liberties. Recent publications have shown that scholars freely express their political differences with governmental policies in Cuba (see the collection, *Cuban Perspectives on Cuban Socialism, S&D #52*). Furthermore, Carnoy presents no argument supporting a necessary relationship between a superior educational system and lack of political liberties.

I recommend this book to all those interested in understanding practical applications of the socialist experience.

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Ennis Carter, ed., *Posters for the People: Art of the WPA* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2008).

Ennis Carter has assembled almost 500 artistically accomplished and socially consequential posters produced by the Poster Division of the Federal Arts Program (a project of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration, or WPA). Her short Introduction notes that artists engaged by the Poster Division, which established workshops in eighteen states, produced two million copies of 35,000 designs, of which only a small fraction have been catalogued. Carter has aptly grouped these often stunning and charming posters into twelve categories, ranging from "Health & Safety" to "American Cultural Traditions." Her fine achievement in selecting and grouping the posters is, however, diminished by her failure to provide greater context for these socially important works.

Carter writes that this unprecedented (at least in peacetime) US government-sponsored initiative in the graphic arts "relates to the complex goals and objectives of the New Deal." Unfortunately, this beautiful and thoughtfully crafted volume makes no attempt to relate individual posters to specific New Deal programs or to the ethos of the New Deal. Perhaps Carter concurs with Christopher DeNoon, the author of the Foreword, who calls these posters "timeless images of beauty and artistic accomplishment." This statement evades the importance of knowing the specificity of time, place, and socio-political circumstances of their production. The posters are not only illustrative; they carried a symbolism supportive to a broadly defined social democratic movement, viz. the New Deal. Detached from those associations, the posters' messages appear antiseptic or even trite. The absence of accompanying text reduces posters such as "Eat Fruit for Healthy Living" or "Use the Hook and Save Your Fingers" to empty, pious visual appeals. When placed within the context of the New Deal's programs promoting public health and the overall needs of workers, the posters convey, in addition to their manifest message, unstated reminders of the Roosevelt administration's socially and politically progressive orientation. While homemakers and workers during the Depression very likely inferred these associations, they require some prompting for those who are far removed from their production and daily display.

In their totality, the WPA posters represent an iconography that reminded their viewers of the Roosevelt administration's commitment to the "forgotten man," who was more than likely "ill clothed, ill fed, and ill housed." Posters announcing the construction of public

housing in Cleveland (“Live Here at Low Rent” and “Your Children Will Like These Low Rent Houses”) surely were not produced and displayed solely – or even primarily – to apprise unemployed tenement dwellers of the availability of above-average housing at below-average rents. Such housing would attract people even without carefully crafted wall-posters in public venues. The posters were first and foremost political statements celebrating the accomplishment of a major New Deal program. Similarly, the twelve posters announcing exhibits of Native American arts and crafts signify not only their ostensible purpose but also the New Deal’s heightened respect for Native American cultures and languages. WPA posters mirrored the New Deal’s cultural pluralist impulses, which clashed with the assimilationist policies of previous administrations.

Posters for the People shows many posters – “Rural Pennsylvania” and “Visit Montana” – that draw attention to aspects of a particular state’s cultural or natural heritage. However, the editor makes no connection between these posters – whose obvious message was “come see this!” – and the WPA Federal Writers’ Project guidebooks to the forty-eight states and Washington DC, which featured tours of the states’ natural, historical, and cultural sites. The WPA posters promoting travel within the United States or suggesting that one “Read a Book About Canada” or “Use Your School Library” were premised on ideas of Progressive reformism, one of the components of New Deal philosophy, that the broadening of the experiences and thinking of the people was essential to a movement intent on replacing unbridled profit-making with social uplift. These posters’ often insipid messages express, albeit in whispered tones, the New Deal’s social democratic impulses, which necessitated wider social horizons and concerns from constituencies not reachable with printed materials. Posters that drew attention to the natural wonders of a state and encouraged their viewers to visit it, were connected to the New Deal’s goals of developing and enhancing public spaces, encouraging support for conservation, and protecting wildlife – goals enunciated earlier by the Progressive Era. Posters that relate to these latter concerns are present in this volume, but no connection is drawn between them and the posters promoting travel.

In contrast with the WPA paintings discussed in Laura Hapke’s recently published *Labor’s Canvas*, there is a near total absence of overtly leftist themes in the WPA posters selected in *Posters for the People*. These posters were snapshots produced and displayed in public venues where the maximum number of people could view them. Each one was intended to make a single point, to provoke a

particular thought or action. By their nature, they are the ideal genre for political agitation. Paintings were seen as the work of individual artists who had ownership over their production. Therefore they were permitted a wider range of expression as to content and style. Paintings might bring about a deeper change in consciousness, but posters could promote rapid change among large audiences.

The right wing relentlessly targeted the Federal Arts Program. Consequently, the WPA-produced posters almost always avoided unambiguous leftist iconography and themes. Nonetheless, it is impossible to explain the firestorm of right-wing opposition to the WPA's arts projects had these works not conveyed basic assumptions and concepts congruent with social democracy and antithetical to possessive individualism. This can be best understood by imagining what might have been the content of posters produced by, say, Herbert Hoover's administration. Whatever might come to mind, it reminds us of what was *not* present in the WPA posters (e.g., the American flag, busts of the Founding Fathers, red, white, and blue bunting, etc.). The secular-humanist ethos of the New Deal posters is unmistakable – at least it was to the political Right.

Posters for the People does not completely exclude leftist imagery. "Pennsylvania" and "Work with Care," both created by Isadore Possoff, depict older workers grasping their tools in a monumental style associated with socialist realism. By simply blazoning their titles, such as "One Third of the Nation" and "It Can't Happen Here" (themselves products of a Left rhetoric), WPA posters advertising plays produced by the Federal Writers' Project projected a clearly Left political message.

There are instances where the editor should have done some additional work. The poster announcing the exhibit "Picasso: Forty Years of His Life" at the Art Institute of Chicago is dated "ca.1936-1940." Surely, it would not have taken much effort to find the date of such an important exhibition. Similarly, the first name of Mayor Edwards, who is mentioned in the poster that urges viewers to "Join the Mayor's Milk Fund," and the name of the city over which he presided, could have been discovered without great effort. At least ten of the posters in this collection are not posters at all but covers for books produced by the Federal Writers' Project. The one poster in Spanish, "Evite Accidentes" (Avoid Accidents), is placed in the section "Health & Safety," but it is in fact a Civil Defense poster that belongs in the section "War & Defense."

The originality of the WPA posters' designs and their aesthetic value enticed viewers to give them more than a glance. Their artistic

quality enabled them to lay claim to public spaces and conveyed the sense that their messages were important. All those who appreciate the concepts and creations of Popular Front culture, broadly defined, will savor these reproductions. *Posters for the People* will stimulate its readers to learn more about this high point of the New Deal's support for public art and the heightened social consciousness it helped to engender.

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Raya Dunayevskaya, *The Power of Negativity: Selected Writings on the Dialectic in Hegel and Marx*, eds. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002).

This excellent volume offers a unique collection of essays, correspondences, drafts, presentations and papers that effectively span Raya Dunayevskaya's later years after the break with Trotsky (1938) and C.L.R. James (mid-1950s). The documents are clearly presented and are well-chosen, offering a valuable insight into the mind of this radical thinker. Hudis and Anderson's introduction proffers a clear focus for the volume on the idea of dialectical negativity and situates this body of work within the whole of Dunayevskaya's life and thought.

The volume is divided into five distinct periods and themes beginning with Dunayevskaya's unique contribution to Marxist-Humanism before going on to her studies of dialectics in Part II. This second part offers a careful analysis of the concept of dialectics that conjoins Hegelian and Marxian themes. It also contains a series of correspondences with Herbert Marcuse which I found to be the most interesting part of the book, as it reveals the differences in approach to dialectics between the Frankfurt School and the Socialist-Humanists. Parts III and IV give particular emphasis to Hegelian-inspired notions taken up in Marx's so-called 'early humanism' and also by Georg Lukács. The final part offers various papers and letters that look to revolutionism and the question of '*what comes after*' in terms of such matters as organisation, youth, and women's liberation. It is appropriately titled "The Changed World and the Need for Philosophic New Beginnings", a question that was of utmost concern to Dunayevskaya with the

seeming triumph of Thatcherism and 'Reaganomics' before her death in 1987.

The concept that is central to Dunayevskaya's thought – and which is the primary focus of this volume – is the Hegelian notion of Absolute negativity. It has connotations similar to recent readings of Hegel by Maker and Williams regarding the 'double dialectic',⁶ and by Berthold-Bond, who has shown that Hegelian dialectical negativity does not result in a "closed ontology".⁷ It would appear that this interpretation of an open-ended dialectic immanent to Hegel's *Logic* is growing in acceptance, and is a welcome development in political philosophy as it represents the opportunity to break with those readings that have reduced dialectics to a Marxist husk, dismissing it as being, at best, dogmatic and, at worst, a closed ontology ushering in a totalising metaphysics. This volume represents a key opportunity for the radical Left to reclaim the fundamental perspective and process of the dialectic and channel it towards emancipatory ends. For too long, dialectics has been misunderstood and its potential unrealised. Dunayevskaya's thought offers dialectics as a means to push forward the horizons of political possibility, to overcome what the editors of the volume rightly identify as the 'crisis of the imagination' in contemporary politics (xxv).

The notion of Absolute negativity is taken from Hegel's *Science of Logic*, where he goes beyond pure or abstract negativity and calls for absolute negativity, which not only rejects the old but is in fact the basis for a new development or a forward movement.⁸ Hegel rejects the notion – so often charged against him – of an Absolute that is *oppositionless*. Rather, at the conclusion of this work Hegel affirms the Absolute Idea as nothing less than 'absolute liberation', the point at which humanity moves towards its freedom.⁹ As is well known, Dunayevskaya is readily accepting of Hegel's idealism (she is avowedly "not afraid" either of the "'system' of Hegelian philosophy, or of the idealism of the Absolute Idea" [109]), but what is important in this volume is not her defence of idealism but her argument that

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6. Philip T. Grier, ed., *Identity and Difference: Studies in Hegel's Logic, Philosophy of Spirit, and Politics*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2007, chapters by William Maker ("Identity, Difference, and the Logic of Otherness") and by Robert R. Williams, ("Double Transition, Dialectic, and Recognition").
 7. See Daniel Berthold-Bond, *Hegel's Grand Synthesis, a Study of Being, Thought and History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 136, cited in Dunayevskaya, xxiv.
 8. G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (A.V. Miller Trans.) (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1969), 113. See also Dunayevskaya, xviii-xix.
 9. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 824, 843.

absolute negativity offers new beginnings rather than closure; it offers to negate existing conditions of *unfreedom* and to create new ones of 'liberation'.

While the volume contains many illuminating insights, one of the key contributions is the 'Dialogue on the Dialectic' (Chapter 6), which presents part of the correspondence between Marcuse and Dunayevskaya from 1956–1963. While it would be worthwhile also to see Marcuse's replies, Dunayevskaya's letters alone reveal important insights regarding the need to develop and move toward "*new political forms*". What Dunayevskaya is arguing for is something "concrete" regarding the "'new passions and new forces' for the establishment of the new society" (97). It is this humanism that she seeks to ground using the dialectic, and she looks to the African and Hungarian Revolutions as contemporaneous events that manifest Hegel's "*absolute liberation*" in Absolute negativity (102) – events she returns to later in the volume in "Liberation Today" (Chapter 11). These events are the deepening struggles on the world scene that mark the "dividing point" of our epoch for "free, individual, total liberation" (103).

Dunayevskaya's key insight here is linking the concept of dialectics to the waxing and waning of revolutionary periods: for Hegel, the failure of the French Revolution to move to freedom and self-liberation; for Marx, the whole period between 1848 and 1859 (104f); and for Lenin, the evolution from his "vulgar empiricism" in 1905 to his re-engagement with Hegel culminating in the *April Theses* of 1917. The point for Dunayevskaya is to hear "today's masses" in their own terms but also through the philosophy of Hegel; that is, *dialectically*. It is in exploring this nexus between Hegel and Marx that Dunayevskaya makes her unique contribution to present-day struggles. As she put it, "Each generation must reinterpret Marxism for itself" (93), and she offers great insights into doing just that. She admitted in one of her letters to Marcuse that she needed to return to Hegel to find a new relationship of theory and practice to suit the epoch (107). It is an admission that I think we should all share.

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