Introduction: Marx’s Capital in the Struggle for a New Human Society

by Andrew Kliman

This special issue of The Hobgoblin on Marx’s Capital carries three chapters of Raya Dunayevskaya’s 1958 Marxism and Freedom which analyze and comment on all three volumes of Capital, as well as her late 1970s’ critiques of Ernest Mandel’s “Introduction” to Volume I and of Roman Rosdolsky on Marx’s method. Also included are new essays by Dave Black on the concept of value and Chris Ford on the free association of producers.

In the face of unprecedented retrogression, the struggle for new human relations continues. A whole new movement against exploitative global capital has emerged, and tens of millions of people worldwide have mobilized in opposition to the U.S. government’s “permanent war.” Yet people engaged in these and other struggles must also struggle daily with an inner enemy, the ever-present spectre of TINA – “there is no alternative.” TINA weighs like a nightmare on our brains, constricting our thought processes and making our brains themselves impose limits upon what we dare to fight for and even to hope for.

These self-imposed limits should not be confused with realism and practicality. TINA has led to the resurgence of an unrealistic, almost desperate hope that, though capitalism is here to stay, it can nonetheless be reformed in a fundamental and sustainable way. How else can we account for the renewed popularity of social democracy, even though it collapsed everywhere just as Russian state-capitalism did, unable to sustain itself and its reforms in the face of neoliberal reaction? Moreover, the theoretical basis of calls for “fair exchange,” more representative international financial and political institutions, “living wages,” and similar nostrums is, all too often, unrealistic hope that fundamental reform is sustainable.

What we need, I think, is a different sort of hope, hope grounded in real possibilities for a better future, and a different sort of thinking – dialectical thinking – that can help us search out and develop the real possibilities that TINA-think assumes away. Capital continues to deserve careful study as a prime example of revolutionary dialectical methodology in action. Although many leftist theorists today regard the dialectic as an expression of capital’s “totalizing” logic, in Marx’s hands the dialectic “includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction; … it regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well; … it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary” (Marx, Postface to the 2nd ed. of Capital, Vol. 1).

Thus, although Mandel’s “Introduction” and other commentaries try to divide Marx into a revolutionary and a “strictly scientific” economist, this division is untenable. From the dual character of the commodity on the first page, to Volume III’s law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit, the internal contradictions of which produce economic crises, Capital’s “positive” theory of how capitalism functions includes “negativity” within itself. The
system’s dualities and internal contradictions are what make it inherently unstable and therefore something humankind can transcend. At each moment, however, discerning how this abstract possibility can become a real one requires a lot of hard thinking.

Another reason why Capital continues to have direct implications for political practice is that Marx was taking on ideologies quite similar to those of our day. On the one hand, he combats the ‘TINA-think of bourgeois political economy (“there has been history, but there is no longer any”). At the same time, he combats the political economy of Proudhon and other leftists who claimed that the ills of capitalism can be ameliorated by reforming monetary, exchange, and financial relations, while leaving the capitalist mode of production intact.

This latter dimension of Capital is often suppressed. Some leftists do not want the specificity of Marx’s ideas to interfere with their calls for us to “unite” – behind them; others want to attach his name to perspectives and projects that have more in common with the tendencies he fought than with his own ideas. Marx himself, however, continually fought for his specific ideas within the movement, especially once Capital was published and available for all to study. In 1875, the “Marxist” (Eisenach) and Lassallean political parties in Germany united on the basis of the Gotha Programme. Marx’s critique of this Programme complains again and again that its positions and demands fail to measure up to the theoretical conclusions worked out in Capital. This was no academic exercise. He opposed the unification of the parties precisely because he found the Programme’s ideas wrong and inadequate. He would not let the desire for unity interfere with the development of ideas. The ideas are what give action its direction, as Dunayevskaya often put it.

When Capital is considered as a critique of bourgeois political economy only, not a critique of Proudhonist political economy as well, some of it becomes inscrutable or even pointless. Consider section 3 of the first chapter, on “the value-form.” This section contains an intricate dialectical derivation of money from the commodity form, but what is the point? Marx is emphatic that this derivation is crucial – “we have to perform a task … we have to show … we have to trace” – but why? The answer, I believe, is that he is showing money to be a necessary consequence of commodity production. In order to do away with the social ills associated with money and exchange, it is necessary to do away with commodity production. Conversely, as long as commodity production remains, so must money and the social ills associated with it. As Marx had written earlier, in a critique of Darimon, a Proudhonist, “it is impossible to abolish money itself as long as exchange value remains the social form of products. It is necessary to see this clearly in order to avoid setting impossible tasks, and in order to know the limits [of] monetary reforms and transformations of circulation [commodity exchange]” (Marx, Grundrisse, Vintage Books, p. 145).

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Dunayevskaya’s interpretation of Capital, too, can offer us crucial assistance today as we labour to search out and develop real possibilities for a new, human society. She challenges the widespread leftist faith that abolition or reform of market relations can overcome capitalism. Simultaneously, she “grasps the transient aspect” of alienation and exploitation, which are engendered and sustained by the historically unique system of capitalist production. Only in this system is there an incessant drive to produce ever-more “value” – ever-more wealth as an end in itself, wealth that is produced in order to produce more wealth, not to satisfy human needs. And only freely associated workers, Dunayevskaya
contains, can abrogate the law of value and thereby make their products serve them, rather than the opposite. (Suddenly the words “commodity fetish” take on a whole new meaning.)

Some of what she said about Capital is more widely recognized today than when she wrote, and a whole school of Marxian economists and philosophers – the so-called “value-form” school – now emphasizes, as she did, Capital’s focus on capitalism’s historically unique character. Yet what it emphasizes is the uniqueness of a society dominated by money, market exchange, and finance. Marx realized that, in a society “bounded by the craze for making money,” it is difficult “to see in the character of the mode of production the basis of the corresponding mode of circulation, [not] vice versa” (Capital, Vol. II, Kerr ed., pp. 132-33) It is all the more difficult in an era in which finance seems increasingly to be the prime engine of money-making.

Thus, much of what Marx said, and Dunayevskaya reclaimed, about the relationship between production and the market has yet to be understood, much less internalized. Consider another statement from Volume II to which she draws attention: “The peculiar characteristic is not that the commodity, labor power, is saleable, but that labor power appears in the shape of a commodity.” “Huh?,” one can hear frustrated and bemused readers ask. “What is a commodity if not something saleable?” If Marx was right that the commodification of workers’ labour power (capacity to work) is the defining characteristic of the capitalist epoch, then those who want to transcend this epoch would do well not to let the question remain a rhetorical one.

What made Dunayevskaya singularly able to reclaim dimensions of Capital that many overlooked or found opaque – and others have suppressed – was her conviction that Stalinist Russia was a state-capitalist society, together with her felt need to substantiate that conviction by grounding it in Marx’s theory. Russia’s statified property and Plan sufficed to make it non-capitalist in the eyes of those who equated capitalism with private property, the market, etc. Rejecting that equation, she was able to discern that Marx had distinguished capitalism from all other societies on the basis of its historically unique mode of production, a mode of production that, she held, prevailed also in Russia. This insight into the uniqueness of capitalist production enabled her to develop a new interpretation of Capital in which “commodity,” “abstract labour,” “fetishism” and other concepts were no longer centered in the market and exchange.

Thus Dunayevskaya’s presentation of her new interpretation of Capital is tightly interwoven with her analysis of Russia as a state-capitalist society. Yet the former is not reducible to the latter. It remains relevant in an era in which state property, planning, and the Party are, thankfully, widely recognized not to be panaceas, but in which faith persists that mere changes in property forms, exchange relations, and political institutions can bring about sustainable social change.

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Reading Dunayevskaya on Marx, however, is no substitute for reading Marx – nor do I think she meant it to be. Her commentaries on Capital are all “argumentative” rather than “expository”; they are interventions on specific issues that sometimes presuppose the reader’s familiarity with the book, not attempts to popularize it or tell us “everything we need to know” about it. She regarded Mandel’s lengthy introduction to Volume I of Capital as a
“burden” on the work and a “vulgarization” that presented his views instead of Marx’s. The particular content of his introduction is no doubt part of what angered her, yet, especially in the last decade of her life, Dunayevskaya also expressed profound dissatisfaction with how even the best “post-Marx Marxists,” such as Engels, had treated Marx’s work. Because they were overly confident that they understood his work, she argued, they too gave us popularizations that presented their views as his. (See “Marxist-Humanism’s Challenge to All Post-Marx Marxists,” in the 2nd ed. of Dunayevskaya’s *Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation, and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution*, Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991.)

In the case of a book like *Capital*, there is a constant temptation to rely on popularizations, as well as a temptation to read commentaries like Dunayevskaya’s as if they provided the same “assistance.” I think it is crucial to resist such temptations. Precisely because *Capital* is so difficult and complexly structured, one ends up either reading the popularization instead of the book, or reading the book through the popularizer’s eyes, lightly glancing over unfamiliar things and finding (of course!) that the rest confirms what one already “knows.” Unfortunately, what has long been said about there being “no royal road to science” is true.

I’d like to conclude with a comment on another kind of resistance to the patient, methodical study that a work like *Capital* demands of the reader. Like much of the 1960s’ New Left, many young leftists today think that “too much” emphasis on theory is a bad thing, that it leads to hierarchy and the authoritarian vanguard party. I consider this a radical misdiagnosis. The vanguard parties were long on flexibility and short on genuine theoretical reflection and development. (I recently learned that the U.S. Communist Party held classes at its Jefferson School, ostensibly on *Capital*, in which students never even opened the book.) Rank-and-file members needed to learn flexibility, not ideas, in order to fall in behind the changes in the party line, and the name of the game was to follow the leader, not to follow out the logic of ideas to their conclusion. And if we fail to follow out the logic of ideas, we inevitably end up following someone or something else. We either follow the leader or rely upon “common sense” – i.e. unthinkingly follow bits of bourgeois ideology instilled in us since birth.