

“These [Christian] principles make freedom independent of any such things as birth, standing or culture. The progress made through them is enormous, but they still come short of this, that to be free constitutes the very idea of man. The sense of this existent principle has been an active force for centuries and centuries, and an impelling power which has brought about the most tremendous revolutions; but the conception and the knowledge of the natural freedom of man is a knowledge of himself which is not old.”

—Hegel, *Introduction to History of Philosophy*

“It appears to me when objective and subjective are so interpenetrated that the preoccupations of the theoreticians of the man on the street is can we be free...the assertion of freedom, ‘personal and free’ and full liberation takes precedence over economics, politics, philosophy, or rather refuses to be rent asunder into three and wants to be one, the knowledge that you can be free.”

—Dunayevskaya, May 12, 1953

I) There is a growing literature on the Syrian Revolution. This includes first-person accounts in books and documentary films, collections of testimony like Wendy Pearlman’s *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled*, and the work of revolutionary Syrian intellectuals like Yassin al-Haj Saleh.

There is also a growing body of poetry and fiction by diaspora Syrian artists.

Yet just in the last week, I have heard both Rightists and Leftists reducing the entire Syrian experience since 2011 to this: “There is no evidence that Assad gassed his own people.” Of course, there is copious “evidence” of this because it is fact, as it is fact that Assad and his fascist regime shot, tortured, humiliated, blew into pieces, robbed from, *committed genocide* upon, and sold to his imperialist masters, Iran and Russia, “his own people.”

This absurd reductionist approach to the Syrian Revolution is an incredible rewriting of history that ignores the massive, peaceful revolutionary demonstrations of 2011. It ignores the grassroots efforts at self-defense that were forced on the Syrian working class by the Assad regime’s violent response to these demonstrations. It ignores the entire worldwide influence of the Arab Spring, the affinity of Tahrir Square and Wisconsin that blew away decades of “Otherness” etched by Bosnian genocide and al-Qaeda atrocities, and it insults the activists of Kafranbel making a principle of speaking the mind of the grassroots revolutionaries to the world through their banners and weekly demonstrations.

In short, this approach—now almost universal—ignores the Idea of freedom. From the revolutionaries of besieged Homs to Kafranbel and Maarat al-Numan, this Idea often expressed itself explicitly as *humanism*. We documented this in *News & Letters* and it will be a selection of these pieces that makes up the main text of the book.

There were a few heroic mainstream reporters like the late Marie Colvin and Remi Ochlik (murdered by Assad), activists like Kayla Mueller (murdered by ISIS), and volunteer FSA fighters like Eric Harroun (driven to suicide by FOX News slanders and U.S. government persecution). There were a few ex-military who had served in Iraq and were inspired by

the Arab Spring to see that only revolution in both the Middle East and the U.S. could prevent future wars—we met them through Occupy Chicago. Later we met principled activists like the Turpins, and their Anti-War Committees in Solidarity with the Struggles for Self-Determination, who made it possible to continue support activity, if not life itself for me.

Unfortunately, there has been no major cultural figure of the stature of Susan Sontag who saw support of the Syrian people as central to the defense of human civilization, as Sontag did in Bosnia.

It was fascinating, in retrospect, to have been able to confront a variety of prominent figures over the meaning of the Syrian Revolution—Richard Wolin, Glenn Greenwald, Tariq Ramadan, and Bernardine Dohrn—and see how little the realities of either the movement from practice or the Idea of freedom itself entered into their thinking. It seems that many intellectuals and activists were pulled by something much different—something that never seems to have a name until it appears full blown as the next stage of capitalist development. In *Marxism and Freedom* RD, critiquing the Second International, called this “the actuality of capitalist progress as *dehumanization*” (p. 163).

It seems to me that we are seeing this next stage of state-capitalism becoming manifest as an authoritarian state-capitalist surveillance regime embodying the “despotic plan of capital.” The recent appointment of the former head of the National Security Agency, Keith Alexander, to the board of Amazon is telling. Alexander was responsible for the NSA’s massive surveillance of U.S. citizens’ phone records that a federal court has ruled was illegal. This obviously wasn’t a disqualification for the big tech firm that has profited most from the current worldwide COVID-19 crisis.

It could be noted that even some who have been Marxist-Humanists have missed the logic of capitalist development. I am thinking of one of our prominent former comrades who gave a talk at Left Forum a few years ago about how social media could be used as an Archimedean lever to help bring about social revolution. This idea flowed from the moment of the Arab Spring (and earlier Green Movement in Iran), of course, when Twitter and Facebook were used by revolutionaries to organize demonstrations, to track police movements, and to send information to the world outside.

Just as the Arab Spring and Syrian Revolution shook bourgeois society to its foundations, so the rulers have adapted to this tactic, and the big tech companies that already represented an intensification of capitalist development have become pillars of the surveillance state.

It was Marx’s genius to show that the despotic plan of capital inheres in the commodity form and that it *moves* in history. Thus the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation, in *Capital*, both mirrors the commodity form in Chapter 1 and captures its tendency to move toward greater dehumanization until its transcendence by freely associated human beings with an entirely different *concept* of labor.

This historical movement of capital is the negation of humanity and nature, and humanism is *its* absolute negation, as Marx worked out philosophically.

II) I have to admit that one thing which has held up the finish of this projected work is the question that haunts me: What right do I have to speak of the Syrian experience? The books of testimony, like Pearlman's important work, avoid this by allowing Syrians to tell their own stories.

I have heard a lot of these stories myself. In the course of Syrian Revolution support, I have met numerous men who carried the physical and mental scars of torture. I have talked to a young woman who described trying, futilely, to breathe life back into a dying infant in the first East Ghouta gas attack. I have hugged a man who told me that if he returned to Syria he risked being killed, and I have seen his body carried through his streets as a martyr.

There's more, but in fact, these experiences have been shattering for me. I have talked to a therapist about the survivor's guilt.

So it is very important to discern what I might have to add to the existing literature. It seems to me that can only be a serious philosophical contribution beginning from the Absolute. How to do this?

III) Here I want to "detour" into the abstract, in particular in regards to the question of "the Other" which we have been dealing with since our work in opposition to the Bosnian genocide in the '90s.

What I want to do is present a sort of Plutarchian parallel lives of the Idea in Marx and in RD's Marxist-Humanism. In doing this, I would also like to keep in mind two moments in Hegel's philosophy. First, the final paragraph of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where "[philosophically] comprehended History" forms "alike the inwardizing and the Calvary of absolute spirit." Second, the critique of the Third Attitude to Objectivity in the *Smaller Logic* which RD singled out in 1986 as important for the dialectics of organization and philosophy: "to show that in point of fact there is a knowledge which advances neither by unmixed immediacy nor unmixed mediation, we can point to the example of the Logic and the whole of philosophy."

A) When Marx first broached the subject of "permanent revolution" in 1843's "On the Jewish Question" he was dealing with an issue that still burns today, the "Other" as an object of political discrimination. In the same period, in his *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* Marx singles out the proletariat as the revolutionary class that can overcome the contradictions of bourgeois society. The following year he will work this dual question out further in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* as revolutionary "humanism," a second negativity transcending either communism or atheism.

As well, in 1844 Marx will single out the Man/Woman relationship as central to this dialectic of second negativity. Like alienated labor, this alienated human relationship opens to the perspective of the Notion that is its own Other.

In “Private Property and Communism,” Marx wrote: “...fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and...fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution between man and nature, and between man and man...between the individual and the species.” While Marx doesn’t directly refer to Hegel’s “eternal Idea,” you can see how, in discussing an “infinite progression” of causes in this manuscript he comes very close to restating Hegel’s movement through Logic-Nature-Mind. (This is material for a whole other paper, but what I’m referring to is how, in my view, Hegel transforms Aristotle’s positing of an “unmoved mover,” or first cause of being, into the structure of his *Encyclopedia*.) Marx also comes close to restating Hegel’s critique of Aristotle on freedom—that he didn’t know “that man is in and for himself free” —which likely formed the basis of Marx’s discussion of Aristotle, the commodity form, and slavery in Chapter 1 of *Capital*.

Thus Chapter 1 of *Capital* contains the history of Western philosophy in itself—Marx keeping the promise he made in the 1840s that the proletariat were to be its inheritors.

None of this was as an ending, but a new beginning, a new continent of thought. RD pointed out in her 1986 letter to Louis Dupre that Marx’s concept of “revolution in permanence” could be seen as a translation of Hegel’s “eternal idea” from the *Philosophy of Mind*. Thus, it was a new beginning made from the Absolute.

(I should mention in passing that, almost exactly one hundred years after Marx’s essay “On the Jewish Question” witnessed the Warsaw ghetto uprising. This is a stunning, vertigo-inducing, example of how little “Marxists” had been able to build upon that concept of revolution in permanence. When we have been faced with genocide directed mainly at Muslims in Bosnia and Syria many “Marxists” haven’t been much better than those Marx addressed.)

1844 was Marx’s philosophic moment, from which his life’s work flowed. For RD’s Marxist-Humanism, that philosophic moment came with the May 12 and 20, 1953, letters to Grace Lee on Hegel’s Absolutes. There RD translates the final syllogism of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Mind*, on how “The eternal Idea, in full fruition of its essence, eternally sets itself to work, engenders and enjoys itself as absolute Mind,” as “We have entered the new society.” [May 20]

It is fascinating to see here, in 1953, how inextricable the Black struggle is from the absolute method that leads to this philosophic breakthrough. “Now watch this,” RD writes, in a passage where we hear one of the great thoughts of American civilization articulated: “Each new stage of exteriorization (that is, of further determination) is also an interiorization, and greater extension is also higher intensity’ [Hegel, *Logic*]. What a more perfect description of going outward with [Charles Denby’s *Indignant Heart*], and becoming richer inward and more intense” [May 12].

Again, with RD, as with Marx, we see a new beginning made from the Absolute. In her case, this includes the Absolutes of *both* Hegel and Marx.

B) In Marx's greatest work, *Capital*, 1867/75, there are a few aspects I'd like to single out. First, that question of the Other continues to play a part. Marx writes in the chapter on "So-Called Primitive Accumulation" of "the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines" of Indigenous peoples in America; of "the conquest and plunder of India"; and the slave trade in Africans. RD shows in *RLWLKM* (p. 148-9) that in terms of the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation, this "primitive accumulation" also pointed toward the coming of imperialism.

It also gestures toward Marx's late work, the *Ethnological Notebooks*, with their study of Third World societies and the role of women in history. Thus, the very logic of *Capital* demands what would be *new* projections of humanism in regard to these societies.

Second, as RD also pointed out in Chapter V of *M&F*, the U.S. Civil War and abolition of slavery affected the structure of *Capital*, for example, on the struggle for a shorter working day. This marked the influence of the movement from practice that is itself a form of theory: "All of history is the history of the struggle for freedom. If, as a theoretician, one's ears are attuned to the new impulses from the workers, new 'categories' will be created, a new way of thinking, a step forward in philosophic cognition" (p. 89).

So the movement from practice allows a theoretical work to be a *projection*, pointing toward the future, rather than just a critical reflection on existing reality. It isn't too much to say that the "new forces and new passions" that "spring up in the bosom of society" would certainly include new human relationships between workers in developed capitalist countries and people of other cultures and countries.

This insight shouldn't be separated from RD's point in *P&R* (p. 93) that in *Capital*, "The negation of the negation' allows in but the faintest glimmer of the new, 'new passions and new forces' for the reconstructing of society, but no blueprints for the future there."

I want to put this moment in Marx together with RD's 1974 Hegel Society of America lecture on "Absolute Negativity as New Beginning." It's interesting to note here her statement regarding the *Science of Logic* and Hegel that: "While he neither gave, nor was interested in, any blueprints for the future, he was not preoccupied with death, the 'end' of philosophy, much less of the world. His philosophy is 'the end' only in the sense that 'up to this moment' philosophy has reached this point with 'my' philosophy of absolute negativity... When subjected to the dialectic method which, according to Hegel, no truth can escape, the conclusion turns out to be a new beginning. There is no trap in thought; though it is finite, it breaks through the barriers of the given, reaches out, if not to infinity, surely beyond the historic moment" (*New Essays*, p. 21).

She contrasts this to the Frankfurt School theoretician Theodor W. Adorno and his work *Negative Dialectics*. This work is directed against the absolute method, the positive in the negative, the negation of the negation, and blames it for the "theoretical inadequacies of

Hegel and Marx” (p. 23). RD writes, “Adorno, very nearly out of nowhere, suddenly brings in Auschwitz, seeing some sort of kinship between it and absolute negativity: ‘Genocide is the absolute integration...Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death...Absolute negativity is in plain sight and has ceased to surprise anyone.’”

RD relates this to “one-dimensionality of thought once you ‘give up’ Subject, once you do not listen to the voices from below” and “the substitution of a permanent critique not alone for absolute negativity, but also for ‘permanent revolution.’” She cites in contrast the great Third World theorist of the African Revolution, Frantz Fanon, as well as East European Marxist humanist Karel Kosik—though he also would come to grief in not opposing Slobodan Milosevic’s war on Kosova in the ‘90s, following the collapse of Communism in East Europe.

Again, here, I want to point out that burning question of the “Other.” In fact, *News & Letters*, as edited by Black production worker Charles Denby, existed to make that kind of philosophic projection—voices from below unseparated from philosophy of revolution in permanence. Likewise, *American Civilization on Trial*, the second edition of *Indignant Heart*, *Frantz Fanon, Soweto, and American Black Thought*, and other works were such projections of the original category of “the Black masses as vanguard.”

(That category also helped inform our later work, *Bosnia-Herzegovina: Achilles Heel of Western ‘Civilization.’*)

C) In Marx’s 1875 “Critique of the Gotha Program,” I’d just like to single out a few points. First, his point that labor is *not* the source of all wealth, and that nature is just as much the source of use values—naturalism/humanism—shows this critique to be in continuity with both 1844 and *Capital*, philosophically. Further, then, to the great point of principle: “...after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!” This entirely different, *humanist* concept of labor will also require an entirely different concept of the state.

Here again, we have Marx’s version of Logic-Nature-Mind and the “eternal Idea,” not explicitly as philosophy but as principle.

Second, the criticism of the narrowing of internationalism to a national perspective is also significant in the way it would preclude any such relations between the working class of developed capitalism and Third World peoples as *Capital* and the *Ethnological Notebooks* look toward. (Even aside from a new *workers’* International.)

These two points are a devastating judgment on just how much of that absolute general law of capitalist accumulation these “Marxists” couldn’t grasp, and of how helplessly disarmed

they were about to be in face of the new stage of imperialism, war, and revolution. It is a magnificent projection that, as RD pointed out in her June 1, 1987 presentation, laid the ground for organization.

The third point I want to touch on is the point on “freedom of conscience.” Briefly, though I agree with the formulation “Everyone should be able to attend to his religious as well as his bodily needs without the police sticking their noses in,” it isn’t clear to me that this was sufficient to answer the impending rise of European anti-Semitism. It appears that a new movement from practice was needed there. It is both inspiring and heart-rending to think of the great Eleanor Marx going out in the 1890s to organize among London’s poor Jewish workers, and then announcing at the start of the Dreyfus persecution: “I am a Jew!”

In her June 1 presentation, RD returns explicitly to the “CGP.” I would like to ask, what was *new* in the June 1 presentation? I know it has sometimes been interpreted as a return to Marx in order to work out post-revolutionary economic perspectives, which doesn’t seem to rise to the level of philosophy, economics and politics wanting to be one and the “eternal Idea.” I’m certain that’s not what RD meant.

As RD said, it was the “whole new concept of ‘post-Marx Marxism as a pejorative’—it just laid there in *RLWLKM*” (*TPMMH*, p. 19). Might it be described as Marx, the philosopher of revolution in permanence, taking in partners on the basis of the Absolute Idea as New Beginning? As in, “...each person’s special point of concentration—be it labor, Women’s Liberation, youth, Black, etc.—will be inseparable from the meaning of that activity, will be projected to those not yet Marxist-Humanists, because in meaning, i.e. philosophy, is both ground and roof of all we do, survey, strive for, as we prepare for that ‘revolution in permanence’” (p. 18).

In creating the category of “the philosophic moment” here, isn’t RD saying that projection requires that philosophic depth and seriousness? I am thinking, especially, of her own *Women’s Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution* as one such projection.

That is, weren’t we being asked to *project* the struggles of revolutionary Subjects unseparated from the self-determination of the Idea of freedom? I can imagine it as these Subjects, these “Others,” “occupying” the ground of Marx’s “CGP.” RD names labor, Black, women, youth, and that beautiful “etc.” *and their meaning and direction in a global context.*

It’s a fruitful idea. Terry is working on the new women’s project. I could also foresee us doing a pamphlet on disability activism that could take off from the ground of the “CGP,” along with environmentalism, or a new prisoner work, among others.

IV) That was a long detour, but I think it has been necessary for me to try to understand the Syria project in terms of exteriorization and interiorization. As a Marxist-Humanist and American revolutionary it is really what I have to contribute to the “meaning in a global context,” not that all the above explicit discussion would be repeated, but be a basis for projection.

It is also the standard by which to choose the pieces to be included as selections from a now pretty large body of writings. Some of those will be better as incorporated into an introduction, which I am working on.

With Kafranbel and Maarat al-Numan pulverized into dust by Russian bombs and Iranian mercenaries, the Syrian Revolution is routinely demonized, lied about, and (along with the Arab Spring in general) projected as grounds for an ultimate hopelessness that underpins the current stage of state-capitalist degeneracy—authoritarian rulers, surveillance capitalism, environmental destruction, a “Left” corrupted and cynical beyond measure, and a brutalized public discourse that hardly resembles human speech. That is, Free Syria is an ultimate Other to this, a scapegoat.

The attitude, implied and enforced, is that if only people would just wallow in the status quo society wouldn’t have so many problems. It’s an upside-down worldview.

As one revolutionary said, “We thought we were fighting Assad and then realized we were fighting the world.” We can contribute significantly to this “meaning in a global context.” There is still needed support work to be done in conjunction with publishing. We need to renew some connections. It would be worthy to initiate an effort to collect the late Alisar Iram’s writings, working with others. We are determined not to let the moment of Arab Spring be forgotten.

I would add that as part of our brutalized public discourse “Marxism” is under attack as I seldom remember—it isn’t only the oft-repeated common coin of the Right now that “Marx was a racist,” but that claim has also penetrated the Left—I’ve recently seen it represented on Louis Proyect’s blog with very little pushback. Even some who have become friendly enough to us to reprint articles from *News & Letters* express this attitude.

Marx will survive, because he represents the self-determination of the Idea, but between external attacks, Trump’s executive orders, and Leftist self-immolation and self-censorship it looks to me like much of post-Marx Marxism is in pretty big trouble. Even *were* we to grant that Marx was inevitably a man of his time in some respects, there is a more profound point to be made: the Absolute Idea, as Dunayevskaya pointed out, does not mean *you* thinking.

RD says in her June 1, 1987 presentation: “In Hegelian dialectics, the philosophic moment is a determinant; even if the person who was driven to articulate the Idea of that ‘moment’ was very nearly unconscious as to its depth and its ramifications, it remained the element that governed the concretization that follows...” (*TPMMH*, p. 7) Might we see that “depth” and “ramifications” as “interiorization” and “exteriorization,” as well, perhaps, as Archives and projection?

Time seems ripe (even, as Trotsky once quipped, somewhat rotten) for such a new beginning from the Absolute Idea.