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Automation, the Absolute, and Socialist Humanism: the Dunayevskaya-Marcuse-Fromm Correspondence

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[The Dunayevskaya-Marcuse-Fromm Correspondence, 1954-1978: Dialogues on Hegel, Marx, and Critical Theory](#)

Edited by Kevin B. Anderson and Russell Rockwell

Lexington Books, 2012

Revolutionary and Hegelian-Marxist philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya struggled throughout her life to win a hearing for her ideas, developed in decades of intense participation in the international Marxist movement. A new collection of correspondence between her and two more well-known radical thinkers—Critical Theorist Herbert Marcuse and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm—sheds light on Dunayevskaya's Marxist-Humanism, permitting the reader access to the debates on dialectical philosophy, automation, and the structure of capitalist society she had with these two influential intellectuals.

Editors Kevin Anderson and Russell Rockwell situate the thinkers' exchange of ideas in an introduction that helps to establish the contrast between Dunayevskaya, schooled not in the academy, but in the theoretical and political battles of the left, with Marcuse and Fromm, products of both the rigorous German university system and the Frankfurt School, although the two thinkers were estranged from the latter by the time their relationships with Dunayevskaya began.

It is to Marcuse's enduring credit that he was open to the intellectual outreach from Dunayevskaya to him in late 1954, facilitated by their common friend the art historian Meyer Schapiro (Dunayevskaya knew Schapiro from their mutual participation in the milieu of Trotskyism in New York). Marcuse had been in the consciousness of both Dunayevskaya and her then-co-thinker C.L.R. James since the publication of [Reason and Revolution](#) in 1941. Dunayevskaya and James were both highly impressed by this work and it spurred them on to creative engagement with Hegel's dialectics, in participation with the philosophically trained Grace Lee. This effort, totally contrary to the theoretical stream of Trotskyism, was to provide the content of the Marcuse-Dunayevskaya dialogue after the interest in Hegel on the part of both James and Lee diminished substantially by 1951. This divergence of intellectual perspective was in large measure what precipitated the 1955 split between Dunayevskaya on one hand and James and Lee on the other.

Marcuse greeted with reserve a philosophic interpretation of Hegel's Absolutes Dunayevskaya shared with him in 1955. Later in her life, Dunayevskaya came to regard these two texts, composed in May 1953 as letters to Grace Lee (available in [The Power of Negativity](#), another collection of Dunayevskaya's writings), as her most groundbreaking work, but Marcuse, although respectful, commented, "I still cannot get along with the direct translation of idealistic philosophy into politics." He had sufficient confidence in her however, to lend assistance in bringing to publication a

manuscript on Marx she had been working on in several forms since the 1940s. Marcuse contributed a preface to this work, [Marxism and Freedom](#) (1958), which is included in the collection. Anderson and Rockwell rightly draw attention to this text as an important one in which Marcuse, who had substantive disagreements with Dunayevskaya on the potential of the contemporary proletariat as a revolutionary subject, effectively established the position he was to amplify in his most influential work, [One Dimensional Man](#) (1961). Although brief, Marcuse's text outlines the concept that was to become known as one-dimensionality more closely in the context of Marx's thought than in his later influential book.

The same year *Marxism and Freedom* appeared, Marcuse published [Soviet Marxism: a Critical Analysis](#), a work marked by a curiously equivocal attitude toward the social and political structure of the post-Stalin U.S.S.R. Dunayevskaya, who had long held that proletarian revolt within state-capitalist Russia was as inevitable as it was in the private capitalist West, refrained from commenting on the book until much later in the interest of preserving their dialogue, but its appearance effectively marked a turning point in Dunayevskaya's attitude toward Marcuse.

The relationship between Dunayevskaya and Marcuse deteriorated from this point, but she remained respectful of the effort Marcuse had exerted towards ensuring that she would not be, in her word, an intellectual "nonperson." The extreme theoretical skepticism of *One Dimensional Man*, along with its analysis of the role of automation in both its existing capitalist form and its potential role in a non-capitalist society (centered on what the editors describe as Marcuse's insistence upon "creativity *outside of labor*"), only served to widen the already existing gulf. Their intermittent correspondence after an explosive exchange in early 1961 over Dunayevskaya's criticism of Marcuse's friend Isaac Deutscher is polite, but obviously strained. Their intellectual relationship was effectively over long before Marcuse became the reluctant godfather figure to the New Left.

Dunayevskaya's correspondence with another emigre German intellectual was equally substantive, but more congenial in tone. Psychoanalyst and social critic Erich Fromm contacted Dunayevskaya in 1959, asking her to provide translations of Marx's 1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts for a book Fromm intended to publish. Dunayevskaya declined, clarifying that she did not know German and reminding him that the Marx translations that appeared in *Marxism and Freedom* (which Fromm had mentioned that he admired) were done from a Russian edition of Marx's work.

The solicitation from Fromm's must have been encouraging to Dunayevskaya. Fromm had an audience many times greater than Marcuse and had eked out the position of widely-read and respected social critic of the Eisenhower era with his books [The Sane Society](#) (1955) and [The Art of Loving](#) (1956). Anderson and Rockwell make the point in their introduction that Fromm's increasing interest in Marx at this time was something of a leftward turn for him, and a fortuitous convergence of focus with Dunayevskaya's Marxist-Humanism. Fromm's [Marx's Concept of Man](#) (1961) won a mass audience for the Economic and Philosophic Essays of 1844 and represented belated recognition for Dunayevskaya's effort in drawing attention to their importance.

The Dunayevskaya-Fromm relationship proved to be a productive one. Fromm invited Dunayevskaya to contribute an essay to his collection [Socialist Humanism](#) (1965), which also included a submission from Marcuse. Fromm was long-estranged from Marcuse and the other members of the Frankfurt School over sharp disagreements in interpretations of Freud's thought. Fromm and Marcuse had exchanged criticisms over Freud in the pages of *Dissent* in the mid-1950s and as Dunayevskaya's relationship with Marcuse deteriorated, Fromm increased in importance as a sympathetic thinker with influence in the academic and publishing world. Fromm was of assistance to her in publishing [Philosophy and Revolution](#) (1973) and helped secure the successful publication of a German [translation](#) of the book.

At least two themes of interest are present in the later Dunayevskaya-Fromm correspondence: the work of the Frankfurt School and the importance of the feminist dimension of Marx's thought. The two frequently exchange critical views of Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer, with Fromm delivering harsh criticisms based on the experience of his definitive rupture with the leading lights of the Institute for Social Research in the 1930s. Fromm even comments that the genesis of the idea of "Critical Theory" was an unprincipled tactical retreat from Marxism in the face of the political defeats of the era (see the editors' summary of Fromm's letters to Dunayevskaya of July 28, 1975 and October 2, 1976). Fromm is equally acerbic towards Marcuse, whose radicalism in the period of the New Left, Fromm believed, stemmed in part from a subjective desire "not to lose customers." Fromm and

Dunayevskaya also exchange views on the resurgent women's liberation movement of the 1970s and the potential for a mutually beneficial encounter between feminism and humanist Marxism. Both thinkers also shared an interest in Rosa Luxemburg, on whom Dunayevskaya published a book in 1981. Unfortunately, Fromm's death in 1980 ended the lively intellectual relationship between the two.

The correspondence between Dunayevskaya and Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm provides a valuable supplementary view into the work of these three thinkers. While the Dunayevskaya-Marcuse relationship may be familiar to readers with knowledge of Dunayevskaya's Marxism and Freedom, the sharp differences between the two revealed by their correspondence may contribute to a new understanding of both of their ideas. The lesser-known Dunayevskaya-Fromm relationship has even a greater potential to enrich our comprehension of the work of the two thinkers, in particular, previously unappreciated aspects of Fromm's humanist Marxism. The respect shown by both Fromm and Marcuse towards Dunayevskaya's work, while not without—especially in the case of Marcuse—its critical elements, may help to deepen interest in her substantial contribution to twentieth-century Marxism.

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