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Philosophic Dialogue

LENIN, HEGEL AND WESTERN MARXISM-critical responses

As a contribution to the recognition of the 80th anniversary of the Russian Revolution we print excerpts from, and the author's response to, three of the many critical reviews of Kevin Anderson's **LENIN, HEGEL AND WESTERN MARXISM, A CRITICAL STUDY** (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995) 311 pp. To order, go to literature page.

Paul Le Blanc in MONTHLY REVIEW (October 1996)

...Anderson's book, **LENIN, HEGEL AND WESTERN MARXISM, A CRITICAL STUDY**, despite certain limitations, makes a substantial contribution to the scholarship on Marxism, on Lenin, and on the interrelationship of philosophy and revolutionary theory. Specifically, this is the first book-length examination of Lenin's own 1914-15 studies of the early 19th century German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Lenin took up these studies at what would seem an odd historical moment: the eruption of the First World War, the collapse of the Socialist International, and the quickening of a revolutionary upsurge that would yield both a new wave of anti-colonial national liberation struggles and the Russian Revolution of 1917...

...An obvious source that Anderson has drawn from is a subterranean current that took such things seriously fifty years ago: the Johnson-Forest tendency, a tiny grouping inside the U.S. Trotskyist movement, viewed harshly by some people as a bizarre little cult wrapped within an only slightly larger sect. At first blush, this seems as strange as Lenin immersing himself in Hegel studies in 1914. Yet the Johnson-Forest tendency distinguished itself not only by a passionate engagement with the ideas of such people as Trotsky, Lenin, Luxemburg and Marx, but also with an incredibly serious concern over the philosophical dimensions of revolutionary Marxism...

"Johnson" was, in fact, C.L.R James, the great Marxist historian, culture critic, and Pan-Africanist whose contributions have recently excited considerable enthusiasm among substantial sectors of what remains of the left-wing intelligentsia. "Forest" was the formidable Raya Dunayevskaya, who inspired feminist theorist Adrienne Rich to comment recently: "We can be sure that Marxism is no more dead than the women's liberation movement is dead, that the ways of reading Marx that Raya mapped for us are more challenging than ever in our time"...

...Earlier than most on the Left, those who were in or influenced by the Johnson-Forest tendency developed a serious theoretical approach to Black liberation and women's liberation struggles--recognizing their inherent validity, the need for their relative

independence, and the revolutionary dynamic in their relationship to the no less important struggles of the working class...

For all of its strengths, however, this work of political philosophy suffers from a disconcerting abstractness. Lenin is treated as a philosopher more than as a practical revolutionary leader, and this introduces odd distortions. Diverse writers who emphasize Lenin's role as such a leader are accused by Anderson of "treating Lenin's theoretical work as being primarily political or organizational in an immediate sense," and as failing to see Lenin "as an original political and social theorist whose ideas affected his political practice"....

The problem manifests itself again in Anderson's mostly excellent discussion of Lenin's 1917 classic *STATE AND REVOLUTION*, in which he effectively defends its libertarian content from trendy bourgeois critics such as A. J. Polan. He demonstrates that for Lenin "the dictatorship of the proletariat" represents a radical workingclass democracy.

...But Anderson is not happy with Lenin's continued adherence to the concept of a revolutionary party, which is characterized as the negative element in "Lenin's paradoxical legacy." So intent is he on separating the "bad" Lenin from the good, that Anderson claims "in 1917 the notion of the party almost disappeared from his writings"--which tells us more about the author's tunnel vision than it does about Lenin in 1917...

One of Anderson's most substantial sources on all of this is a quote from Raya Dunayevskaya: "Unfortunately, the great transformation in Lenin, both on philosophy and on the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat, did not extend to Lenin's concept of the party, which, despite all modifications in actual revolutions, remained essentially what it was in 1903." Interesting as is Dunayevskaya's assertion, it does not make up for the lack of the careful textual analysis of which Anderson is quite clearly capable, not to mention the absence of any serious historical analysis of the 1917 revolution. Lenin made mistakes, it can be argued, that undermined the radical socialist democracy that was his goal (disastrous mistakes can be found especially in the Civil War period of 1919-1921, as he himself pointed out). Nor was Lenin's earlier political thought free of blind spots. Such problems could be fruitfully explored by a critical scholar such as Anderson if he was not diverted from such explorations by taking the easier but less fruitful path of vanguard-bashing...

Paul Le Blanc is the author of **LENIN AND THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY**.

Neil Harding in *SLAVIC REVIEW* (Spring 1997)

Dispassionate and serious study of Lenin's thought that conforms to the rigor of contemporary scholarship on other major political thinkers is still in its infancy. Prevalent judgments on Lenin are still based more on prejudice and political PARTI PRIS than they are on normal canons of textual and contextual evidence. A symptom of the primitive

state of Lenin studies is the virtual absence of thorough and detailed studies of his major (and allegedly seminal texts). Kevin Anderson's **LENIN, HEGEL AND WESTERN MARXISM** is an attempt to remedy that deficiency as far as Lenin's **PHILOSOPHIC NOTEBOOKS** is concerned. Anderson's title might lead one to suppose that the broader issue of the Hegelianization of Marxism in the twentieth century is his major theme, whereas, in fact, the third part of the book (the least satisfactory) is largely concerned with the much narrower issue of how later Marxists received Lenin's Notebooks (or explained why they neglected them). Part 1, "Lenin on Hegel and Dialectics," is undoubtedly the most impressive and original part of the book in which the claim that Lenin's whole mind-set was transformed by his reading of Hegel in 1914 is made and sustained...

It is the larger picture that unhappily tends to be set aside. Nowhere do we really get the flavor of Lenin's original. Anderson's careful commentaries and reflections lead us to suppose that what we are dealing with is a finished and continuous original text expressing a considered and distinctive philosophical position, but Lenin's text is not like that at all. The **PHILOSOPHIC NOTEBOOKS** are notoriously difficult to interpret precisely because there is very little of Lenin in them. There are underlinings, extracts in boxes, exclamations, quotations with emphases, brief marginalia, occasional reflections combined with a virtual absence of continuous narrative. These are undigested notebooks of Lenin's reflections on other thinkers--particularly Hegel. For that reason they are the most difficult texts to construe and to integrate into Lenin's oeuvre. There is, about this section of Anderson's book, something of the law of diminishing fleas. Anderson is himself too engaged ever to reflect that what he is doing is offering us Anderson (via Raya Dunayevskaya) on Lenin on Hegel (and Anderson's filial piety to Dunayevskaya pervades not merely the acknowledgments but the whole of his book)...

Neil Harding, is the author of **LENIN'S POLITICAL THOUGHT**.

Michael Lowy in RADICAL PHILOSOPHY (May/June 1997)

Thanks to its impressive argumentation and wide scholarship, this book brings to life a new and unexpected Lenin, poles apart from both wooden "Marxism-Leninism" and dismissive Western scholarship. A follower of the Hegelian Marxist Raya Dunayevskaya, Kevin Anderson gives us a sympathetic but critical assessment of Lenin's attempt to assimilate Hegelian dialectics into revolutionary politics.

The starting point for Anderson's argument is Lenin's **NOTEBOOKS** on Hegel of 1914-15, a series of abstracts, summaries and comments, mainly on Hegel's **SCIENCE OF LOGIC**. In spite of their fragmentary and unfinished nature, these constitute Lenin's philosophical and methodological break with Second International "orthodox" Marxism, and, therefore, with his own earlier views, as codified in his crude and dogmatic polemical piece of 1908, **MATERIALISM AND EMPIRIO-CRITICISMÉ**

Curiously enough, Anderson fails to mention a more obvious example of the impact of the Hegel NOTEBOOKS on Lenin's dialectics of revolution: the "April Theses" of 1917, where, for the first time, he called for the transformation of the bourgeois-democratic revolution into a socialist one. This major turn--a radical break with the Russian Marxist tradition, common to Mensheviks and Bolsheviks--was only possible because of Lenin's emancipation, thanks to Hegel, from the strait-jacket of Plekhanovite Marxism, with its rigid, pre-dialectical notion of "stages" prescribed by the "laws" of historical "evolution"...

The last section of the book deals with Lenin's NOTEBOOKS and Western Marxism--a category that Anderson does not challenge, even though his data show that the opposition between dialectical and vulgar-materialist Marxism does not coincide with any geographical distinction between "East" and "West."

Lenin's NOTEBOOKS were published in the USSR in 1929, but Soviet Marxism nearly buried them, canonizing **MATERIALISM AND EMPIRIO-CRITICISM** instead. While some Western Marxists, such as Lukacs, Bloch, Goldmann, Lefebvre, Marcuse, and, above all, Dunayevskaya, showed interest in them, others (e.g. Colletti and Althusser) either ignored or misinterpreted them, from a materialist/positivist standpoint, hoping to drive Hegel's shadow "back into the night" (Althusser)...

Of all Western Marxists, only Dunayevskaya made the NOTEBOOKS central to her overall theoretical project, with an extensive--and increasingly critical--series of writings, the 1950s to the 1980s. Her **MARXISM AND FREEDOM** (1958) is the first serious discussion in English of the Notebooks, and the first to try to relate them to Lenin's views on imperialism, national liberation, state and revolution. In **PHILOSOPHY AND REVOLUTION** (1973) the issue is taken up again, but this time emphasizing Lenin's philosophical ambivalence. Finally, in a new preface for this book (her last writing), Dunayevskaya insisted on Lenin's too narrowly materialist reading of Hegel.

Michael Lowy is the author of **LUKACS, FROM ROMANTICISM TO REVOLUTION**.

Kevin Anderson responds:

In a brief response, it is impossible to take up all of the serious issues raised by the reviewers. Paul Le Blanc identifies with some of my discussion of Lenin's 1914-15 Hegel Notebooks, and with the argument that it was under the impact of those studies that Lenin developed an original and important body of writings on imperialism, national liberation, the state, and revolution. However, Le Blanc takes issue with my criticism of Lenin for failing to rethink dialectically his concept of the vanguard party to lead after 1914.

I want to clarify the fact that I was not counterposing spontaneous forms of organization from below to the party to lead in the manner of C.L.R. James or even Rosa Luxemburg.

Instead, I was hinting at a still deeper problem, what Raya Dunayevskaya in her last years called the need for a concept of the "dialectics of organization and philosophy." To develop such a concept, she argued, we would need to go beyond Lenin's party to lead, to build on Marx's non-vanguardist but philosophically grounded concept of organization in the **CRITIQUE OF THE GOTHA PROGRAM** and elsewhere, and to place front and center the importance of dialectical philosophy as ground for revolutionary organization. Lenin raised many questions which can help us to get there, but he did not take us there.

I was glad that Neil Harding expressed some appreciation for my analysis of Lenin's 1914-15 Hegel Notebooks. Unfortunately, Harding downplays their importance, arguing that they are "undigested notebooks" which do not express a "distinctive philosophical position."

I do not think that Harding's critique holds if one carries out a close reading of Lenin's Notebooks. There, Lenin critiques what he called Plekhanov's "vulgar materialism," and he appropriates critically some core Hegelian categories such as self-movement, subjectivity, and the creativity of cognition (see for example Lenin's statement that "cognition not only reflects the world but creates it" -- **COLLECTED WORKS, Vol. 38**, p. 212). Contra Harding, I think it is clear that Lenin was indeed developing a new set of dialectical concepts in 1914-15. These new concepts can be found neither in his pre-1914 writings nor in those of Lenin's contemporaries such as Trotsky, Luxemburg, and Bukharin.

The review by Michael Lowy shows the clearest grasp of the issues I tried to address. I agree with his view that my discussion of the relationship of Lenin's Hegel Notebooks to the April Theses, a subject on which Lowy has written, may have been too truncated.

Lowy also comments on my treatment of the discussions of the Notebooks by philosophers such as Lukacs, Lefebvre, Althusser, and especially Dunayevskaya, who was the first to have pointed to the sharp divergence between them and Lenin's earlier **MATERIALISM AND EMPIRIO-CRITICISM**. Althusser, and even Lukacs, not to speak of the Stalinist ideologues, labored to deny this divergence, something which has contributed, far more than is generally realized, to the disorientation of 20th century Marxism.

Today, as we mark the 80th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, we need, in the teeth of hostile bourgeois critiques, to stress the world-shaking achievements of that Revolution: the uprooting of Tsarism, the establishment of soviet power, the support of national liberation movements from Ireland to India. We also have to face its limitations, especially the establishment of a single party state.

In addition, we need to celebrate the fact that the Russian Revolution's principal leader, Lenin, was the first Marxist after Marx to place the dialectic back where it belonged, at the center of Marxist theory. This included his call in 1922, not long before his death, for us to become "materialist friends of the Hegelian dialectic." That call is still timely today.