

THEORY / PRACTICE

by Raya Dunayevskaya

Founder of Marxist-Humanism in the U. S.

May 1, 1986

Paul Buhle, Director

Oral History of the American Left

Tamiment Institute, New York University

The taped interviews by Grace Lee Boggs (3/28/83) and James Boggs (3/29/83), on file at the Oral History of the American Left, have just been called to my attention. I have learned for the first time that they were interviewed at the same time Oral History of the American Left approached me for an interview during my Marx Centenary lecture tour in 1983. But what I had been told was that the Oral History of the American Left was interested in an interview in connection with the opening of Max Shachtman's documents. I responded that I wasn't interested in participating in a discussion on Max Shachtman.

The calls from Tamiment Oral History, however, persisted. First, Dan Georgakas called. I refused to be interviewed by the man who wrote *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying*, on the Black revolt in Detroit in the 1960s, and had no mention anywhere in that book of Charles Denby—despite the fact that Georgakas knew the work of News and Letters Committees and the many activities in Detroit and in the South of Charles Denby, the Black worker-editor of *News & Letters*, who was also President of the Michigan-Lowndes County, Ala. Movement for Human Rights.

I WAS CALLED once again, this time by someone unknown to me, Jonathan Bloom, who said that he was interested in interviewing me on labor history. I accepted that interview since it meant I could discuss an event I considered most relevant to a history of the American Left—namely, the 1949-50 miners' general strike, the most critical strike in post-World War II labor history, the first strike against automation's introduction, a strike that had never been fully recorded anywhere before. I had participated in those events and had just come to New York from a lecture in West Virginia where I had met in my audience some who had participated in that great strike. I have since expanded the 1983 interview I gave to Tamiment into a full-length pamphlet, *The Miners' General Strike of 1949-50 and the Birth of Marxist-Humanism in the U.S.*, which I co-authored with a rank-and-file participant in that strike.

Let me now turn to the interviews with Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs. Although both interviews contain wide-ranging distortions of the history of the State-Capitalist Tendency from 1941-55, one segment in particular is so serious a re-writing of history as to demand that this letter of protest be sent to you as director of the project.

The historic moment I am referring to is the period of the split-up of the Johnson-Forest [C.L.R. James-Raya Dunayevskaya] Tendency in 1955. Grace Lee and James Boggs were supporters of C.L.R. James (J.R. Johnson) in that split, while the proletarian majority of the organization—headed by the editor of its paper, *Correspondence*, John Zupan, and by the Black worker-columnist, Charles Denby, who wrote its front page

Open letter to Paul Buhle

column, "Worker's Journal," was author of *Indignant Heart*, and later became worker-editor of *News & Letters*—supported me.

HERE IS THE fantastic way Grace Lee describes the issues involved, as recorded in your collection: "In 1955, the Subversive Activities Control Board listed Johnson-Forest as one of the subversive organizations. I'll never forget it. What happened was that Rae [Raya Dunayevskaya] felt that it would be necessary for us to withdraw—not completely in the organizational sense or actually go underground—but to curtail our activities. Lyman and Jimmy in particular—I think the Americanism is very much responsible for this—said, 'we are American. We ought to challenge this. We are carrying on the kind of activity that patriotic Americans ought to carry on. Rather than retreat, we ought to step up our activities.' This was the basis of the split."

A similar, though more brief, version of this fantastic fabrication is told by James Boggs in his interview. He, however, concludes: "I can't quite pinpoint what that split was about..."

There is no truth whatsoever in this fabrication of events by Lee and Boggs. Far from proposing that we "curtail our activities," as these "patriotic Americans" would have us believe, the majority of the State-Capitalist Tendency enunciated its direction loudly and clearly. What Johnson attacked as my desire to "politicize" the organization was my proposal to fight the subversive listing both by consulting a lawyer in New York on how to oppose it legally when we had only 10 days to do so, and by my undertaking a national tour to prepare the Correspondence Committees organization to fight the listing politically.

The full account of the split between the co-founders of the State-Capitalist Tendency can be found in the Raya Dunayevskaya Collection, Archives of Labor and

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Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan 48202. See especially pp. 2408-2592 for the documentary record of the period; for an early critique of C.L.R. James after the split, see "Johnsonism: A Political Appraisal," by O'Brien (Peter Mallory)."

WE FORMED NEWS AND LETTERS COMMITTEES in April, 1955 and set ourselves a dual task—the publication of *News & Letters*, edited by a worker, and my completion of *Marxism and Freedom — from 1776 until Today*, as the full theoretical foundation of Marxist-Humanism, in which the 1949-50 strike is central. (See Section Two of Part V, Chapter XVI on "Automation and the New Humanism".)

We have continued to develop this dual task for more than 30 years, while the organization directed by C.L.R. James, Facing Reality Committee, collapsed. The organization of Lee and Boggs, now called National Organization for an American Revolution, has openly abandoned Marxism.

I request that this letter be appended to my interview in your collection and that it be offered to all researchers examining the history of the Johnson-Forest Tendency. Newly discovered documents, which illuminate the development of Marxist-Humanism as the Johnson-Forest Tendency began to reveal open differences that led to the split between Johnson and Forest, have just been added as part of a new Volume XII of my Archives. (See especially Sections II and III of that Volume XII, "Retrospective and Perspective, The Raya Dunayevskaya Collection, 1924-1986.")

Dr. Philip Mason, Director of the Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, will be happy to assist those who wish to examine my Archives in Detroit. A copy of this letter is being forwarded to him, as well as to Dorothy Swanson, of Tamiment Institute.

Raya Dunayevskaya

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Dear Raya,

May 18, 1987

Enclosed is Paul Buhle's Marxism in the USA. I only got it last Friday, and then learned that you were looking for a copy so I thought I'd sent it straight away. I am sure you will have plenty to say when you are done with it but I thought I would write you my first impressions. I haven't read it all but I have suffered enough (not in the sense of "labour patience and suffering of the negative, but sheer aggravation.)

The preface sets the tone of the whole book. The tone is a story of defeat and tragedy, that is marxism in the US (and I guess if you leave out Marx and Marxist-Humanism, as he does, that is what you are left with.). You get it from page one: "The survival of the movement through all its tragedies." It's a very "personal" view--a sort of unhappy consciousness--the New York intellectual estranged from the mass movement, from the worker-- sad at each passing year, as he grows older, and further away from his youth, finding it hard to comprehend the passing of the glory days of the sixties. The story of "betrayals and disillusionment" (page 3). Perhaps the other side of Jamesian optimism. In fact with Jamesianism in mind I was reading "Why Phenomenology Why Now" and I saw the tendency as clearly "unhappy consciousness." In discovering Russia was a state capitalist society you gain a "mind of your own." But it is left at that, it does not go on to work out what it is for. It remains "a little bit of cleverness," (and James is certainly very clever!) but it remains tied to working out that one concept, and in its critique of the vanguard party remains tied to being its formal opposite-- decentralism versus centralism. It works out nothing new, and remains like a stoic, because the intellectual has no role to play, apart from perhaps longevity in waiting for the masses to act. And though it hit out against the fetish of leadership, in the end it stands for nothing but "the right leadership."

Anyway to the book. But what is Marxism? The book itself reduces it to the theory of class, and reduces theory itself to "culture." And Marx stands for: "The chief error of Marxism, beginning with Marx has been the economic limitation of a class model to the immediate means of production." From this you can gather what he is going to do with Marx. According to Buhle, a "fixed view of Marxism" is rooted in Marx's later writings (page 16). The old biscuit of Marx as economist. (Disregarding all the work you have done in uncovering what he actually did write in his later writings and also what I thought JFT discovered, the relationship of politics and economics in Marx.) Buhle goes onto lump this in with the "practice of the three internationals" as if they are one undifferentiated mass, and as if the Third was not both once revolutionary and later counter revolutionary. The concept of "counterrevolution within the revolution" is outside of Buhle's thought. But to top it all, this master of deceit has to say, "I have sought, more than anything else in this book to cut through the web of forgetfulness."

Oh, but how a mind can so easily forget when it wants to! Or even go as far to create fiction. He wants to bury Marx, and thinks with a little juggling of dates he can get him out of the

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picture. Why is the book from 1870 to Today? What makes it start there, or according to the first chapter 1845. Conveniently at the end of the civil war. Conveniently leaving out what Marx did and wrote then--including the restructuring of capital, the impact of the civil war on the birth of the First International, and the struggle for the Eight Hour Day, and so on. Buhle wants to exorcise Marx's organic relationship to America, he wants to make Marxism a foreign import, that came to America with the immigrants. He wants to cut off Marx's relationship to the Black world (and thus later elevate James). He begins Marxism precisely with the sort of Marxists that led Marx to exclaim that if that was Marxism then he wasn't a Marxist. It's an attack on the American roots of Marxism, specifically what you were working out before the split with James and later published and republished many times as Marxism and Freedom. (and of course he knows that book well enough). In doing all this he sets up Marx as a very European intellectual" (p.20)

Once he has separated the Black dimension from Marx, he can follow through his idea (and the bourgeoisie's) of "Marxism as a foreign import." He can blame Marx for many things done in his name. But before he gets to do that he blames Marx for a "bureaucratic purge" of the American section. Attacking Marx for only seeing change through the trade unions: "Black workers had a place in the marxist scene of things." (p. 36) Just as the anarchists attack Marx ever since Bukanin was expelled from the First International, Buhle tries to paint Marx as a demagogue, and building the expulsion of bourgeois women who wanted to take over the international into a crime of which "the logic of the decision needs to be examined more closely for clues to the fate of Marxism in the USA during the nineteenth century." It is quite astounding when Marx wanted IWA branches to have a majority of workers, and later when the IWA was disbanded and the great 1877 hit the scene Marx felt that they might be the ground for a new IWA. Buhle has reduced the whole history to this event. I am sure he would do well to read the Critique of the Gotha Program and dwell on the passage that says a real movement is worth a hundred programs." For Buhle, I am sure, the "tragedy" is that American Marxists have not had the "right program." Buhle pre-occupation is with organisational form. I haven't yet got to the end of Chapter One. Are you getting ready for this book now!

I haven't read the next chapters. But looking at the titles got me thinking of John's archives, and their importance and a bulletin you wrote in 1953 called "Our Organisation." I have noted that Chapter 4, Leninism in America, is another amalgam of Lenin and Stalin, there is no sense of counter revolution in Russia and what that meant for the world

Chapter 6 "Somewhere Beyond Leninism," god only knows where. Here is where CLR comes into the fore. Of course, Buhle in his preface has already announced his "intellectual debt to CLR." And he makes sure that CLR gets more references than Trotsky, who many trotskyists had considered before his death that "his leadership was a disaster." Leadership, leadership. Not a theoretical question? So in comes CLR to bring a "dynamic mixture of politics and culture." And one mention for you, "James gathered a little group including Raya Dunayevskaya, Grace Lee,

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I would like to know what you make of this book. In the meantime I'll be sending something that you will hopefully find more pleasureable.

Best, Fred Shelley

P.S. I just had a chance to read your Theory/Practice on Russia's latest play. I think it is very good, especially the point about Trotsky & Bukharin being restored as "just names." And the quotes from Natalia are very sharp. If I have a lead on the play I'll send it. I was thinking the column should be sent to some Russia spots who have kept quiet on the subject - apart from eulogy.

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May 20, 1967

Dear Shelley:

Thank you very much for both the new book and especially for your brilliant letter of May 18. I don't mean the brilliance to take away from the profundity, or just to be a compliment. In "my" world it becomes immediately a philosophic category. And that means action. And that spells out assignment. So, would you please transform your critique of Buhia's worded Marxism in the U.S. (whatever made him think he could use the word Marxism? For that chaotic dilletantish, helter-skelter assemblage of "culture" scurrilous gossip as Marxism?) into a 16" article for N&L, a review?

We may wish to add something in it on the question of Detroit, since you weren't here and may not recognize that Dan Georgakas' "analysis" (!?) of what occurred in Detroit in the 1960s, and you may remember that when I was in NY I refused to be interviewed ~~by Dan Georgakas~~ for Tamiment by Georgakas, saying openly that anyone who could write of Detroit in the 1960s without mentioning N&L and ~~was~~ fabricating something that wasn't -- a James-ite scenario-- shouldn't be trusted at all. In any case, the interview was taken finally by someone else who heard me of the 1949-50 miners' strike.

If this copy is the only one you have, I'll send it right back, but you'll have to suffer through my scribbles. But I myself am ~~sitting~~ waiting for the real "culture vulture", CLAJ ("culture vulture" is the term John just reminded me of)...

How is [] Give her my love and take some for yourself.

Yours,

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