REVIEWS

Eclectic Avenue?

David Renton, *Dissident Marxism: Past Voices for Present Times*, Zed Books, 2004. Paperback, viii + 277pp, £14.95

Reviewed by Ian Birchall

DAVID RENTON'S new book presents, in just 238 pages, fourteen twentieth century Marxists – Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexandra Kollontai, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Victor Serge, Karl Korsch, Georges Henein, Dona Torr, Edward Thompson, Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, Walter Rodney, Harry Braverman, Samir Amin and David Widgery.

The book has a clear political purpose. Renton perceives the growth of a new anti-capitalist movement, and aims, as a socialist historian, to make the members of this movement aware of the real traditions of authentic socialism in the twentieth century. For most people the word "socialism" evokes either Stalin or Blair. Renton opens up the rich world of socialists, mostly written out of history, who rejected both Stalinism and social democracy (though critics of social democracy are a bit thin on the ground).

In this aim Renton is wholly right. A new generation and a new movement may well take paths that will displease their elders (they may even find Labour Party ward meetings too boring to attend), but they will undoubtedly draw on and learn from the past. Renton's book can therefore be of considerable value. It is written in a clear and lively style, and contains much precious information, only slightly marred by a number of minor slips which it would be pedantic to dwell on.[1] If the sketches are necessarily brief, when almost every single figure deserves book-length treatment, this is no bad thing, since Renton's enthusiasm will encourage his readers to pursue the topics in greater depth.

The tone is one of dialogue. There are no heroes and villains here. Renton brings out the best – sometimes at the cost of considerable exertions – in each of his subjects to show the contribution they made, but he is also unsparing in his use of firm but fraternal criticism. The book is thus refreshingly free from denunciations of the type still all too common on the left. Denunciation has a great deal in common with what Americans apparently now refer to as "self-dating", an activity which may bring great pleasure to the person indulging in it, but which there is no reason for anyone else to take the slightest notice of.

In this attitude Renton is clearly inspired by his hero David Widgery, to whom he devotes his final chapter. The whole point of Widgery's approach to hippies in the 1960s, or punks in the 1970s, was to establish communication between different groups who were in some sense in revolt against the system. The dialogue was not one-sided; Widgery believed the traditional left had much to learn, especially in matters of style and popularisation. But nor was he some neutral mediator; he knew which side he was on. Paul Foot recalls Widgery telling him that York University students "don't need you … They need the proletariat". Widgery could be savage (Renton kindly recalls his description of myself as a "sniffer dog of orthodox Trotskyism'), but in general his sense of humour enabled him to engage even with those who differed sharply from him. Widgery was one of those rare writers (like *his* mentor Peter Sedgwick, or Eamonn McCann) capable of being simultaneously hysterically funny and profoundly serious.

Renton has cast his net wide. While many of his potential readers will be familiar with Edward Thompson, few will have heard of Georges Henein, reclaimed from oblivion by Renton's own research. Two of the Marxists treated here were born in Egypt, and a third in Guyana, showing a concern to make Marxism relevant to the whole world, and not just to the advanced capitalist nations.

The treatment of women is more questionable. Only two women – Kollontai and Torr – are featured, and neither has a full chapter to herself. Perhaps it would be malicious to suggest these "token women' were added at the last moment, with Renton having an eye to his day job as Equal Opportunities *apparatchik* for NATFHE. Kollontai has two claims to dissident status, as feminist and as member of the Workers' Opposition, but it is impossible to give serious consideration to either in the space of just six pages. Dona Torr's dissident credentials are much more difficult to identify. Renton rests his case on a set of unpublishable notebooks which are said to reveal "occasional disquiet". Surely only a totally amoral zombie could have been a Stalinist for twenty-five years and not suffered "occasional disquiet". Indeed, Victor Serge would have us believe that Stalin himself suffered occasional moments of depression and self-doubt. Did that make him a dissident? Renton would have been better advised to give us a full chapter on Rosa Luxemburg, the patron saint of all dissidents, or, from a later period, Natalia Sedova or Marguerite Rosmer, both remarkable revolutionaries in

their own right who should not be overshadowed by their better-known husbands.

The various parts of this book are of considerable, if somewhat uneven, value. The whole is more problematic. The book could simply have been called "Fourteen Marxists whom David Renton finds interesting" (admittedly not a title likely to appeal to his publisher's marketing department). Yet Renton seems to want to claim something more. The anecdotic links he establishes in the conclusion between his various subjects fall far short of demonstrating the existence of a dissident "tradition".

Dissidence, in fact, is a very slippery concept. Thus when Tony Cliff argued that the states of the Eastern *bloc* were not "workers' states" he became a "dissident" within the Trotskyist movement. But by insisting that only the self-activity of the working class could establish a workers' state he was adhering to the most rigorous Marxist orthodoxy.

Renton's book, therefore, raises a lot of questions which it does not resolve – this, indeed, is one of its great merits. In the space of a brief review I want to consider briefly three themes – Stalinism, voluntarism and nationalism.

Most of Renton's dissidents are defined in terms of their opposition to Stalinism. But the crimes of Stalinism were so monstrous that there were many different ways of opposing it, not all of them pointing in equally progressive directions. Thus Edward Thompson broke with Stalinism at the time of the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution. The sending of tanks against workers' councils was so heinous that only someone in a state of total moral bankruptcy could fail to oppose it. Thompson's moral opposition was expressed with magnificent rhetoric, but it remained moral. Renton discusses the inadequacies of a purely moral critique, but he fails to draw some broader conclusions. Thompson never broke with the Popular Frontism which was the main political manifestation of Stalinism in Britain. When, in the 1980s, he developed the concept of "exterminism" in his tireless campaigning against nuclear weapons, it was in order to argue that the question of nuclear war transcended class divisions and that all classes could unite in opposing it.

Likewise, in his account of Harry Braverman, Renton sees his break with the American SWP as a rejection of "sectarianism". He believed that "McCarthyism would force the American Communists to turn left". (There was precious little sign of this; repression rarely encourages militancy.) What Renton omits to tell us is that Braverman was translating into American conditions the strategy of Michel Pablo for the Fourth International: that world war was imminent, that the conflict of *blocs* would replace the traditional class struggle, and that revolutionaries should abandon independent organisation and enter Stalinist parties.

As Renton makes clear elsewhere, in his discussions of Korsch and Serge, only a rigorous understanding of what Stalinism was could lay the foundations for real opposition to Stalinism.

In his account of Korsch Renton stresses the former's opposition to the "evolutionary and fatalistic Marxism of the Second International". While this did indeed have pernicious consequences, it is not a problem that need occupy us much today. In building the anti-war movement, I rarely encounter people who say: "I shan't be going on the demo; socialism's inevitable anyhow." And if Korsch rejected Kautsky, he hailed the "orientation on the will" of the Fabian Society. From the frying pan to the fire.

Likewise Renton commends Thompson for presenting class in terms of "experience" rather than of "impersonal forces". But unless one is drugged out of one's skull, experience is always *of* something external. The reality of exploitation must precede the experience of class consciousness.

Renton is not wrong to follow Thompson and Korsch in seeing a role for morality and human choice. If socialism were not about people choosing to take action in the hope of a "better" world, then we might as well all roll over and go to sleep. But voluntarism has its dangers too, especially in periods when the working class may appear dormant.

He describes how Baran and Sweezy argued that the historic role of the working class had been taken over by the impoverished masses of the Third World, while workers in the imperialists' lands sided with their own rulers. Hence their enthusiasm for the Cuban Revolution and for Che Guevara's claim that "it is not always necessary to wait until all the conditions for revolution are fulfilled". Renton is far too indulgent towards this voluntarism, suggesting that while in retrospect it may seem unwise, at the time it had a certain legitimacy. Guevara's voluntarism sent hundreds of Latin American revolutionaries, who could have played a part in rebuilding the socialist movement on their continent, to their deaths in an unequal and futile struggle against the state machine.

Renton praises Georges Henein for introducing the Egyptian left to the idea that workers did not need to wait until after national liberation. But by the time the issue was posed concretely in 1952, and striking workers faced the gallows of the so called Free Officers, Henein and his organisation had disappeared. The other two Third World Marxists under discussion add relatively little. Rodney is seen as a failure, though his mistakes are said to demonstrate "enormous creativity". The mistakes include an acceptance of the Stalinist model, for which apparently "we can hardly blame" him. Blame is scarcely relevant; what matters is an effective critique. As for Samir Amin, Renton makes no attempt to conceal the fact that his position is essentially Maoist, and as a result increasingly irrelevant to either First or Third World. Dissidence seems to have little to offer in terms of authentic

socialist strategy for the Third World.

To make these points is not a negative criticism of Renton's book. Renton presents his subjects honestly, and develops critiques as required. But a lot of questions are left unanswered. The greatest value of Renton's book will be in stimulating further discussion.

Marxists in the anti-capitalist movement will face a broad range of debates, from philosophy to immediate questions of tactics. But the most crucial argument will be that about the centrality of working class agency. Ultimately Marxist thinkers will be evaluated, not so much by whether they are "orthodox" or "dissident" as by what they contribute to that argument.

Note

1. There is, however, one error that cannot be left uncorrected. Renton, like his mentor David Widgery, cannot spell the "Leyton Buzzards". The whole point of the name of this long forgotten band – which peaked at No. 53 in March 1979 – is the contrast between proletarian East End Leyton and middle-class Home Counties Leighton Buzzard.

Dunayevskaya's Dialectic

Raya Dunayevskaya, *The Power of Negativity*, Lexington, 2002. Paperback, 386pp, £18.99

Reviewed by Mike Rooke

THIS BOOK collects together the correspondence that Raya Dunayevskaya conducted with other Marxists, groups of workers, students and left wing intellectuals, mostly on the American scene, in the period 1553-1986. The letters and articles chart the work in progress of the development of Dunayevskaya's distinctive brand of Marxism (which in 1957 she described as a "Marxist Humanism"), and which took shape in her two best known works, *Marxism and Freedom* (1958), and *Philosophy and Revolution* (1973).

Raya Dunayevskaya was a Marxist of Ukrainian origin who moved to the USA where she became active in the revolutionary left and the workers' movement. She served as secretary to Trotsky in the years 1937-38, but broke with him over the nature of the Soviet Union, adopting a state capitalist position. She collaborated with C.L.R. James and Grace Lee Boggs in the Committees of Correspondence from 1951 to 1955, and then led the News and Letters Committees from 1955 until 1987 (when she died).

These writings are aptly entitled *The Power of Negativity*, a phrase coined by Hegel to express the essence of the dialectic. They read as a record of Dunayevskaya's continuing preoccupation with Hegel's dialectic, specifically the "Absolute Idea". ("The Absolute Idea has me in its grip", she admits at one point [p.94].)

Two fault lines run through the accumulated (largely academic) discussions of the dialectic in Marx. Along one, the focus is on the nature of the dialectic "itself": is it the substance of being, of "reality" itself, or is it simply a method to be applied to the "reality"? Along the other, the focus is on the relation of Marx's dialectic to that of Hegel: what exactly did Marx take from Hegel's dialectical philosophy, and what did he reject? Much academic Marxist scholarship has been devoted to debating these respective approaches, mostly, it must be said from within the closed world of academic theory. However, although Dunayevskaya's interrogations impinge on both these lines of enquiry, there is nothing of the academic in this book. Its reference points are the new forces of revolution (students, workers' struggles, national liberation movements, the black movement for civil rights), and its focus is an interrogation of Hegel's dialectic in order to understand and relate to these new forces.

The project of Marxist Humanism was for Dunayevskaya a necessary return to the Hegelian dialectic in a period of confusion and retreat for Marxism (the post-WW2 period). Just as Lenin had turned to a study of Hegel's *Logic* in 1914 in order to reorient revolutionaries in the face of the betrayal of the Second International, so Dunayevskaya believed it was necessary to recover the dialectic anew in the period of the degeneration of the Russian revolution. Dunayevskaya was critical of those theorists who tried to "apply" the dialectic analytically, mentioning Marcuse, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and even Engels in the period after Marx's death. By contrast, she believed that Marx's dialectic was deeply rooted in Hegel, and that any real understanding of Marx required a profound understanding of Hegel. This required Marxists to "dig deep philosophically" in order to identify the dialectic of revolution for their age. This meant "digging deep" into Hegel, and specifically "the dialectic of the Absolute Idea". In the particular context of the post war world Dunayevskaya saw the task as "laying a philosophic foundation for the struggle against Stalinism" (p.165), a task made necessary because communism (including Trotsky) had given up "its moorings in Marxian Hegelianism".

So what exactly does Dunayevskaya mean by the Absolute Idea? The biggest problem with this book is that readers unacquainted with Hegel's categories will have to work extremely hard in order to grasp the "philosophic foundation" of Dunayevskaya's Marxism. Early on she tells us that what Marx called communism, Hegel called the synthesis of the "Self-Thinking Idea", but there is little in this book that explicitly throws light on the "materialisation" of the dialectic in the hands of Marx.

The dialectic process for Hegel begins with

abstract universality, enshrined in the "Notion", an absolute whose essence is self-relatedness (Dunayevskaya seems to hold that the Notion is the existence of the Absolute Idea in the world). The "Notion" undergoes objectification via many particular determinations (of reality), and through this developmental process the totality (i.e., the truth of something) is manifested. Readers familiar with Dunayevskaya's books will recognise here her emphasis on the dialectic as "self-development" – the transcendence of the opposition between Notion and reality, a characterisation she identified in Lenin's 1914 writings on dialectics (the *Philosophical Notebooks*). Each new stage of "exteriorization" of the Notion leads inevitably to its further determination (an "interiorization") and its subsequent emergence on a higher level, a movement summed up in the concept of "aufheben". Moreover, for Dunayevskaya, as for Hegel, "method" is synonymous with the content of this dialectic process, rather than an analytical procedure separate from, and therefore applied to it. All of this can be gleaned from a patient reading of Dunayevskaya's copious quoting from Hegel. But when it comes to discerning this dialectic of the Absolute Idea (the Notion) in the texture of our age, Dunayevskaya is less clear (although doggedly enthusiastic!).

Her argument may be summarised as follows: she defines the Absolute Idea most often as a "new beginning", a "new subjectivity" that is the contemporary transcendence of the opposition between Notion and reality (p. 189). It is thus referred to as "full blown liberty" ("the very essence of mind", p.182); "the struggle for freedom", whose expressions are to be found in such struggles as the workers' revolt against Stalinism in Eastern Europe, the black civil rights movement in the USA, and the various national liberation movements in the Third World. This was the substance of the dialectic of revolution for the present age!

Dunayevskaya emphasises that Hegel's Absolute Idea was "total freedom", and the history of actual struggles constituted stages in the unfolding of this idea (it is characterised by self-movement) – that is to say its truth (total freedom) is only manifested on completion of this process. Within it the proletariat is the absolute negativity that makes it the bearer of the new society, and Socialism is a universal which "externalises" itself in the various stages of struggle – the Paris Commune, the soviets (p.17). Dunayevskaya, continually referring back to Hegel, announces that a materialistic reading of Hegel's book the *Philosophy of Mind* reveals it to be the new society (p.26), and that the "Absolute Idea is the method of cognition for the epoch of the struggle for freedom" (p.109).

Dunayevskaya argues repeatedly that the dialectic is defined differently for each "period" ("each period … has its own dialectic" [p.93]). So, for example, for Marx it was summed up in *Das Kapital* "plus the Paris Commune"; for Lenin the "transformation into opposite" of both capital (into monopoly capitalism) and labour (into aristocracy of labour) was expressed in the Russian revolution (*State and Revolution*); for the post-WW2 world the dialectic is the unity of theory and practice, or "what happens after the revolution" (but like so many of her assertions, Dunayevskaya remains tantalisingly vague on the detail).

Readers may legitimately ask why Dunayevskaya retains Hegel's categories as the starting point for her examination of revolution in the 20th century? Implicit in these letters and articles is Dunayevskaya's belief that the degree to which Hegel's categories underpinned Marx's work has never been fully understood by the orthodox Marxist tradition (the Second and Third Internationals). Hegel she says "laid down the prerequisites for Marxism" (p.94), and we have to return again and again to Hegel because, as Marx said of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1844 "all elements of criticism lie hidden in it, and are often already prepared and worked out in a manner extending far beyond the Hegelian standpoint" (p.121). For Dunayevskaya, Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* were unfinished as far as working through these elements was concerned. While she occasionally inserts qualifications about the limitations of Hegel – that his dialectic remains "in mind alone" (p. 50), that it remains "abstract" and "idealistic", the main thrust of this discourse is an unrestrained immersion in Hegel.

We may further ask whether this preoccupation with Hegel delivers more than the "orthodox" Marxist approach? Given that this tradition is for Dunayevskaya one without a dialectic (the Lenin of the *Philosophical Notebooks* excepted), it all comes down to Hegel's Absolute Idea. This of course means the entire content and method of Hegel's philosophical system. The problem is however that nowhere does Dunayevskaya explain precisely what it is and how it functions.

What readers of this book need to know is that Hegel's philosophical system depends on the unity of thinking and being (the true nature of things) – they are taken as one and the same. Thinking and subject matter are therefore identical. In this Hegel had rejected Kant's opposition of the thinking subject to objective being. Hegel's categories are therefore not formal concepts applied by the thinking subject to form the objective world out of a mass of chaotic sensations, but are part and parcel of the movement of things themselves. The method of thinking (logic) is part and parcel of the content of things. When Hegel refers to the Absolute Idea and the Notion he is therefore not referring to concepts abstracted from reality, but categories that are objective.

In taking over this philosophic approach Dunayevskaya avoids the dualism of thinking

subject and objective world that marks much of the orthodox Marxist tradition. She is critical of the false separation between thought (theory) and the real world (practice), a separation that results in seeing the main problem as one of subjective consciousness catching up with objective conditions. She quotes Hegel's critique of empiricism approvingly on this: "the divorce between idea and reality is a favourite device of the analytic understanding" (p.78). It is in Hegel's Absolute Idea of course that the unity of theory and practice is to be found.

Anticipating the question of where the Absolute Idea is to be found, she again quotes Hegel to the effect that the very "ground" of the objective world is the Notion, and brings in Lenin as support: "cognition not only reflects the world but creates it". In this period it is the Notion, the "abstract concept of full blown liberty", that has become an irrepressible material force in the world. All of this, Dunayevskaya argues, calls into question existing forms of party organisation and their relation to the movement of the masses, necessitating a reappraisal that demands the uniting of theory and practice. Specifically this means rejecting the model of the vanguard "party to lead", a rejection rooted in her assessment of the period – one in which workers' councils had posed concretely "the abolition of any division between mental and manual labour" (p.170). But this did not entail "the glorification of spontaneity" that imagines theory ca be picked up "en route", in the fashion of the 68ers, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Cornelius Castoriadis. The evoking of Hegel's Absolute Idea therefore, seems then to have the one aim of reorienting Marxists towards a non-dualist, dialectical grasping of the relation of theory and practice.

The other aspects of the dialectic that stand out in this book are Lenin's "transformation into opposites" (from the Russian revolution to state capitalism), and the dialectic as self-movement/development. On the latter point, although Dunayevskaya does in places make reference to labour (the labour process) as the centre of the dialectic, the idea of the proletariat as self-development is, for this reviewer at least, far too deeply hidden behind the excursions of the Absolute Idea.

This is at once an immensely rewarding and a deeply frustrating book. It is littered with seemingly vital quotations from Hegel (with very few from Marx), but grasping the full significance of these does require more elucidation than Dunayevskaya provides. However, those readers willing to persevere with a difficult text will find it does provoke critical thinking about the dialectic and the nature of the period we are in. Dunayevskaya takes you in unexpected directions, as long as you are prepared to go there via Hegel.

The existing revolutionary vanguards (Maoist, Trotskyist) have, in Dunayevskaya's view, "rejected even the attempt to give a philosophic structure to concrete events" (p.301). A valid criticism that still has relevance to the revolutionary left today. This criticism sums up, if anything does, what she was attempting to redress through these writings. Marxism-Humanism is, as she puts it, "a movement from practice", a reconstitution and redevelopment of the "new Humanism" that Marx embarked upon in the 1840s: "By introducing practice as the very source of philosophy, Marx completely transformed the Hegelian dialectic as related only to thought and made it the dialectics of revolution" (p.297). I consider that this "introducing practice as the very source of philosophy" gives too much to the practice of philosophy, dialectical or otherwise. The crisis of theory and practice that Dunayevskaya is rightly preoccupied with can find its resolution not so much in a renewed philosophical orientation to Hegel (though this is no bad thing!), but in a focus on the dialectic of labour. For this we need to look to the first chapter of Volume 1 of *Das Kapital*, where the dual (contradictory) character of the commodity and the labour that produces it, is examined. There, with the further development of alienated labour in the notion of commodity fetishism, is the route to the concretisation of the unity of theory and practice that Dunayevskaya calls for.

These criticisms apart, the writings collected in this book constitute an important part of the critique of the reified tradition of post-Marx Marxism. Read the book before reading the editor's introduction.

Bush's 'War on Terror'

Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror*, Free Press, 2004. Hardback, 304pp, £18.99

Reviewed by Will Podmore

RICHARD CLARKE has 30 years' experience in security and was the US National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism from 1998 until he resigned in March 2003. Many of his colleagues have also resigned, sickened by the Bush administration's failure to focus on getting Al Qa'ida.

On 25 January 2001, Clarke proposed "urgently" a plan to eliminate Al Qa'ida, but the Bush government took no notice because it was fixated on Iraq. Clarke consistently pointed out to them that there had been no Iraqi-sponsored terrorism against the USA since 1993. (Last September, Bush at last admitted that there was "no evidence that Iraq was involved in the September 11 attacks".) Clarke's first Cabinet-level meeting on terrorism was on 4 September 2002, just seven days before the attacks on the USA; he first briefed the President on terrorism on the day of the attack.

The day after, Clarke went to the White House

expecting “to go back to a round of meetings examining what the next attacks could be, what our vulnerabilities were, what we could do about them in the short term. Instead, I walked into a series of discussions about Iraq. At first I was incredulous that we were talking about something other than getting al Qaeda. Then I realized with almost a sharp physical pain that Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz were going to try to take advantage of this national tragedy to promote their agenda about Iraq. Since the beginning of the administration, indeed well before, they had been pressing for a war with Iraq”.

He writes: “Many thought that the Bush administration was doing a good job of fighting terrorism when, actually, the administration had squandered the opportunity to eliminate al Qaeda and instead strengthened our enemies by going off on a completely unnecessary tangent, the invasion of Iraq. A new al Qaeda has emerged and is growing stronger, in part because of our own actions and inactions. It is in many ways a tougher opponent than the original threat we faced before September 11 and we are not doing what is necessary to make America safer from that threat.”

The war in Afghanistan should have been a rapid search-and-destroy mission by US troops on the ground against the terrorists. Instead, bin Laden, his deputy Ayman Zawahiri and Mullah Omar, the Taliban’s leader, all escaped. The Taliban was not eliminated; they are rebuilding their forces.

Attacking Iraq made us all less secure and strengthened the radical Islamic terrorist movement. There were far more terrorist attacks in the thirty months since 9/11 than in the thirty months before it: there have been jihadist atrocities in Russia, Tunisia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Morocco, Turkey and other countries. The US Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute concluded that the attack on Iraq was “a strategic error of the first magnitude”. Clarke concludes: “Nothing America could have done would have provided al Qaeda and its new generation of cloned groups a better recruitment device than our unprovoked invasion of an oil-rich Arab country.”

Bush and Blair attacked the wrong target when they attacked Iraq not Al Qa’ida. Similarly now, the “left”, the Labour Party and the Conservative Party are all attacking the wrong target when they downplay the terrorist threat and tell us that the BNP is the greatest threat to us. But the BNP, whatever else it does, does not blow up large numbers of workers across the world.

Al Qa’ida is an immediate and serious threat to Britain and other countries. Its supporters run websites recruiting jihadists in Britain for training; they solicit money from British fundamentalists for terrorist front groups, and they are organising cells in Britain. Clarke’s fascinating and revealing book alerts us to real dangers, which Bush and Blair are making worse.