

# Conceptualizing an Emancipatory Alternative: István Mészáros's Beyond Capital

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It is a rare occasion to encounter a work which so directly confronts the central problem of our time. The globalization of capital and commodification of every conceivable area of everyday life, along with the worldwide collapse of an array of revolutionary movements, have provided a near-unshakable foundation for the claim that one or another form of capitalism defines our future. Whether expressed as the "end of history," the "death of the subject," or the "permanence of alienation," the present historic moment is defined by a profound crisis in the ability to envision the transcendence of capitalist social relations. The unsettling character of this reality has spurred a number of recent efforts to reexamine the contemporary importance of Marx's work. In light of the all-pervasiveness and power of the claim that we have no choice but to accept the limits of the given, it has become increasingly evident that the projection of an emancipatory alternative to "actually existing capitalism" is the most important task facing radical theory today.

And yet while there is growing awareness of the need to project anew a comprehensive liberatory alternative, few seem willing to plunge into the actual endeavor. It is one thing to single out some specific aspects of Marx's thought which speak to today (as Derrida does in *Specters of Marx*), and quite another to rethink his *oeuvre* as a whole in light of our present predicament. It is one thing to engage in various critiques of existing institutions and thinkers (important as that may be), and quite another to reconceptualize the very meaning of a socialist perspective. Yet it is precisely here that Mészáros's work takes on great importance. Few others have as directly and honestly confronted the crisis in envisioning an alternative to existing society. He painstakingly shows through this

1,000-page study that present-day capitalism is submerged in a "depressed continuum" characterized by "an endemic, permanent, structural crisis" (Mészáros 1995: 597). Yet he no less painstakingly shows that the failure of all efforts at socialist revolution to move from the mere elimination of capitalists to the abolition of capital itself has placed the very idea of socialism in profound crisis. The abolition of the *personifications* of capital, Mészáros again and again insists, does not necessarily lead to the abolition of capital as a universalizing social form of metabolic control. The persistence of the capital-form as the defining medium of social interaction in Soviet-type societies is proof, he argues, of the insufficiency of focusing on the elimination of the agents of capital as the *ne plus ultra* of socialist theory and practice. Moreover, the failure of such societies to avoid the defects characteristic of "classic" capitalism has turned masses of working people away from the very idea of socialism itself. Mészáros insists that unless we work out what he calls a "theory of transition" that pinpoints the forms by which the revolutionary seizure of power can lead to the abolition of capital, we will be unable to extricate ourselves from the profound impasse which has been reached in the socialist movement.

He writes, "creating the necessary mediations towards [the abolition of capital] cannot be left to some far-away future...for if the mediatory steps are not pursued right from the outset, as an organic part of the transformatory strategy, they will never be taken" (1995: 729). He moreover argues,

It is not too difficult to point to crisis symptoms that foreshadow the breakdown of the established socioeconomic and political order. However, in and of itself the profound structural crisis of the capital system is very far from being enough to inspire confidence in a successful outcome. The pieces must be picked up and put together in due course in a positive way. And not even the gravest crisis or the most severe breakdowns are of much help by themselves in that respect. It is always incomparably easier to say 'no' than to draw even the bare outlines of a positive alternative to the negated object. Only on the basis of a coherent strategic view of the overall social complex can even a partial negation of the existent be considered plausible or legitimate (xvii-xviii).

Mészáros is under no illusions about the difficulty of outlining such a "theory of transition." It entails not only going against the grain of established thought, but also challenging the logic of capital itself, since the very nature of capital as a universalizing social form

is to convey the impression that the transitory, historic stage of capitalism is natural and immutable. At the same time, Mészáros is fully conscious of the pitfall of falling into utopianism by outlining blueprints of a future society. Though hatching utopian schemes may seem immediately satisfying, they generally fail to lift thought beyond the very contours of the social form they seek to critique. The task of confronting the question of "what happens after the revolution" involves a far more laborious and formidable task, one centered on explicating the social formations and tendencies inherent in modern society which can point us beyond the contours of the present capital-system.

Mészáros's book consists not of a delineation of the specific content of such a "theory of transition" as much as a critique of the conceptual barriers standing in the way of its development. The bulk of it consists of a series of extended critiques of those who either pose the capital-form as an immutable law of human history or fail to conceptualize a pathway to its transcendence. Of the former, Mészáros develops a devastating critique of figures such as von Hayek and Weber, while of the latter he sharply attacks the limitations of Social Democracy and Stalinism. He takes special aim at the tendency of Marxists, going as far back as the Second International, to assume that the material conditions of capitalism can be directly utilized to bring forth a non-capital-producing society. Marx of course said many times that capitalism engenders the material conditions for its dissolution. The Marxists of the Second International took this to mean, however, that the centralization of capital and socialization of labor under capitalism would bring forth socialism in quasi-automatic fashion. All that was required was a Party large and strong enough to pick up the pieces once capitalism collapsed. They therefore felt no responsibility to articulate a vision of a socialist future, using Marx's strictures against utopianism as a "pillow for intellectual sloth."

Mészáros stresses that most Marxists failed to see that capitalism's material conditions cannot be directly utilized to create a new society, since they are afflicted with hierarchies of class, gender, and race. Though the material conditions engender the forms necessary for a reconstruction of society, the actual creation of these forms hinges, not on historical necessity, but on the conscious articulation and implementation of human relations which dispense with the capitalist law of value. Though evolutionist confidence in the direct applicability of capitalism's

material conditions for building socialism seemed to suffer a setback with the collapse of the Second International in 1914, it obtained a new lease on life with the transformation of the Russian Revolution into a totalitarian society in the Stalin period. The emergence of stratified property as a veritable fetish in Stalin's Russia and Mao's China convinced even those opposed to Stalinism (such as the Trotskyists) that the abolition of the market and private property represented an advance upon private capitalism. Marxists clung to the assumption that the centralization of capital and socialization of labor, even under a totalitarian regime, proved that history was moving inexorably in the direction of socialism. Burdened by this assumption, they felt little need to address the question, "what happens after the revolution?"

The world which underlay these assumptions came crashing down by 1989. The 1980s proved without a shadow of a doubt that the centralization of capital and socialization of labor when held within the integument of the capital-form did not bring humanity closer to a socialist future, but instead dovetailed with the prerequisites of high-tech "free market" capitalism. Mészáros shows that the nature of contemporary capitalism makes it more problematic than ever to presume that the existing material conditions can be directly appropriated for building a non-capital-producing society. For the reproduction of capital today requires a level of destructiveness of environmental resources and human creativity unprecedented in human history. Given its inherent social and natural destructiveness, it would be the height of foolishness to presume that a post-revolutionary society can base itself on the social productivity of capital. Utilizing the existing material conditions through a mere change of property forms, redistribution of income, or elimination of the personifications of capital can in no way lead to improved conditions of life. The very internal dynamic and social hierarchies which constitute the domination of labor by capital must begin to be broken down in the immediate aftermath of a revolutionary seizure of power; otherwise, not even the most minimal progress can be recorded. As Mészáros argues,

Unless some viable strategies of transition succeed in breaking the vicious circle of the by now catastrophic social embeddedness of capitalist technology, the 'productivity' of capital will continue to cast its dark shadow as a constant and acute threat to survival, rather than being that accomplishment of 'the material conditions of emancipation' which Marx often greeted with praise.[...] [I]n

light of the 20th century historical experience and the failure of all past attempts to overcome the dehumanizing constraints and contradictions of capitalism, the meaning of radical negation can only be defined as a subordinate moment of the positive project of labor's hegemonic alternative to capital itself (432, 793).

The problem which confronts us today, Mészáros argues, is that much of radical thought is ill-equipped to deal with this task. To illustrate this he devotes considerable attention to Georg Lukács. It may seem odd to some readers for Mészáros to spend several hundred pages on Lukács, but this is hardly a subjective decision related to Mészáros's long association with him (he was one of Lukács's most highly-regarded students, corresponded with him long after he went into exile after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, and wrote several perceptive studies of Lukács's work). Mészáros rather focuses so much attention on Lukács in order to direct attention to the conceptual barriers which even the greatest Marxists encountered when it came to confronting "what happens after" the revolution.

The specific problem illuminated by Lukács is brought into focus by his late work, *The Ontology of Social Existence*, written after his break from Stalinism and his return to the philosophic themes which characterized his *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Though his massive *Ontology* is brilliant in many respects, it contains a profoundly self-limiting concept in arguing that socially necessary labor time continues to operate under "socialism." Lukács defended his position through a rather selective reading of a famous passage of chapter 1 of *Capital* in which Marx, in speaking of a future non-capitalist society, says "Let us assume, but only for the sake of a parallel with the production of commodities, that the share of each individual producer in the means of subsistence is determined by his labor time" (Marx 1975: 172). Lukács takes this to mean that Marx views socially necessary labor time as operative in socialism as well as in capitalism, despite Marx's own disclaimer that he was using the notion of labor time "only for the sake of a parallel." This is far from an incidental point, because it meant that Lukács viewed the cardinal principle of capitalism—the reduction of concrete human laboring activity into abstract labor through the medium of socially necessary labor time—as also operative in the "new society." The ramifications of this were most tragically shown in one of Lukács's last works, *The Process of Democratization* (1968). Instead of projecting the need to abolish a social system in which labor remains dominated by capital, he limited himself to

calls for "democratization" within the framework of the structures of "actually existing socialism." He wrote,

The heroic days of the French and Russian revolutions are over, and rather than greatness we have the average. The contemporary world makes for the small, and we must be satisfied to be pale reflections of more noble prototypes from the past.... [W]e must limit ourselves (Lukács 1988: 152).

Such a prosaic vision could hardly speak to today's need for a liberating vision of the future opposed to both "free market" capitalism and what Mészáros considers "non-capitalist capital-producing societies" of the "Soviet" type.

The question that clearly concerns Mészáros is: how can such a profound thinker as Lukács end up posing the capitalist law of value as a veritable immutable condition of human existence? What limitation resides within his thought which prevented him from projecting a truly liberatory vision of a post-revolutionary society? As a most perceptive and sensitive critic of his former mentor, Mészáros knows that Lukács's accommodation with such existing structures can only be explained by the innermost principles of his thought. As Mészáros sees it, the root of the problem lies in Lukács's original theory of class consciousness, projected in his magisterial *History and Class Consciousness*.

As against the Second International's emphasis on material conditions, Lukács posed *class consciousness* as the deciding factor in bridging the gap between the realities of the present and the social forms of the future. As he wrote in *History and Class Consciousness*, "It is an ideological crisis which must be solved before a practical solution to the world's economic crisis can be found" (Lukács 1971: 79). It may be hard for contemporary radicals, raised on theorists stressing cultural theory and non-determinist factors, to realize just how revolutionary it sounded in 1923 to treat class consciousness as subjective and culturally bound rather than determined by objective economic existence. Yet Lukács was a true original in doing so, and in fact placed so much emphasis on the question of class consciousness that he equated proletarian consciousness to the Hegelian identity of subject and object.

Mészáros correctly notes that this involved Lukács in a thorny contradiction. For if the proletariat equals the Hegelian identity of subject and object, how does one explain the gap between the workers's present-day consciousness and the idea of a new society? To answer this, Lukács developed his famous theory of reification.

This centered on the notion that capitalism reproduces itself not only through the transformation of labor power into a commodity, but also through the commodification of thought. By applying this notion of reification of thought to the proletariat, Lukács sought to explain the gap between present-day proletarian consciousness and the idea of a new society, while at the same time posing the full-fledged development of proletarian class consciousness as representing the unity of subject and object. Yet this only succeeded in shifting the contradiction onto a different level. On the one hand, Lukács posed the path to socialism as flowing from the spontaneous generation of workers' class consciousness; yet at the same time, his notion of the reification of thought implied that workers cannot reach socialist consciousness through their own endeavor. After all, if even our thought is reified how are we to free ourselves? Lukács had a ready answer—the *Party* will free you, by serving as the “knowing” of the proletariat. As Mészáros cogently observes,

Paradoxically, by the idealization of the working class as the actual possessor of the ‘standpoint of totality,’ Lukács creates for himself a situation from which there can be no way out except by leaping from imperative to imperative.... [I]n order to be able to bridge the gap between the ideal construct and the rather disconcerting real situation, Lukács is led to an imperatival [*sic*] *substitution*—the Party (326).\*

As Mészáros sees it, this deification of the Party as an outside force to resolve contradiction reflected Lukács's failure to envision the actual “material mediations” needed to surmount the hierarchies of class society. By laboring “under the illusion that theoretical illumination—the work of consciousness upon consciousness—can produce the required changes in social reality” (Mészáros 1995: 360), Lukács failed to spell out how the domination of labor by capital can actually be overcome. This took on critical importance as the problems facing the Russian Revolution intensified. On the one hand, the pressing practical problems facing the young workers' state made it imperative to work out specific forms of mediation which could move the revolution from the abolition of capitalists toward the abolition of capital as a universalizing form of social control. On the other hand, Lukács's emphasis on consciousness as a veritable ethic of revolution

\* Italics in all quotes are in the original.

supplied no concrete answers for what to do within the limitations of the given situation. Confronted with an inability to translate his theoretic imperatives into concrete mediatory strategies, Lukács increasingly accommodated himself to the existing forms of social control being implemented by the post-Lenin regime. In Mészáros's reading, Lukács's capitulation to Stalinism was no matter of personal weakness or lack of bravery. It was the result of relying on subjective factors of consciousness to the exclusion of developing concrete mediatory strategies wedded to the exigencies of the given situation. The more Lukács stressed the ethical power of consciousness, the more he ultimately found himself unable to answer the pressing questions posed by post-revolutionary society. As a result, he was increasingly drawn toward accepting the way those questions were posed by the existing political forces. This had not just political, but theoretic ramifications, as seen in his view that socially necessary labor time continues to operate under "socialism"—a position which he never rejected.

Mészáros's critique of Lukács goes a long way toward answering how such a brilliant Marxist could end up accommodating himself to the permanence of the capitalist law of value. And yet Mészáros's aim is not simply to take issue with Lukács. His real aim is to identify *Hegel* as the one responsible for the failure to project a viable alternative to capital. As he sees it, Lukács's reconciliation with the forms of existing society flows from his attachment to the Hegelian dialectic, insofar as Hegel deifies capital as the ultimate form of human interaction. For this reason, he argues, Hegelian Marxism cannot aid the effort to project an alternative to the power of capital.

Though most reviewers of *Beyond Capital* have tended to overlook Mészáros's critique of Hegel, it actually serves as the conceptual core of the book. It also represents an important point of departure for Mészáros himself, since he was once closely associated with Hegelian Marxism. In the early 1980s, for instance, Mészáros wrote an important essay entitled "Marx, 'Philosopher'" in which he stated,

The speculative verbal supersession of philosophy by "Theory," "Theoretical Practice"...and the like, can only lead to a conservative rejection of the unity of theory and practice and to the sceptical dismissal of Marx's values as unrealizable dreams. (Mészáros 1982: 109).

With *Beyond Capital*, however, Mészáros has moved much further away from Hegelian dialectics and philosophy as a whole,

promoting in its stead the need for a "theory of transition" or, in other words, critical social theory rooted in a "a strategic overview of the social complex."

Mészáros's move in this direction clearly flows from his concern with the ideological hegemony of the notion that "there is no alternative" to existing capitalism. Francis Fukuyama has developed the well-known (and much-refuted) notion that Hegel's philosophy centers on the notion of the "end of history," which he claims has now been reached with the "triumph" of liberal democracy. Though there is but one passing reference to Fukuyama in the book, it is hard to avoid the impression that Mészáros is out to refute Fukuyama while sharing the central thrust of his argument vis-à-vis Hegel. Whereas Fukuyama wants to defend liberal democracy in the name of Hegel, Mészáros wants to debunk it by rejecting Hegel.

Mészáros bases his contention that Hegel's dialectic is the mere expression of the logic of capital on a reading which focuses on Hegel's *political* writings. There are virtually no references to the *Phenomenology of Mind* or the *Science of Logic*, and the few references to the *Philosophy of Spirit* (the third part of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*) are all to its early sections on political and social issues. He mainly focuses on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, and on one passage in particular—paragraph 199, where Hegel says society "now presents itself to each as the universal permanent capital." Actually, in the German original Hegel speaks of "*allgemein bleibendes Vermögen*," which is more properly translated as "universal permanent *wealth*" (Hegel 1976: 130), which Mészáros himself acknowledges in a lengthy footnote. It may appear that Mészáros's argument that Hegel projects the permanence of capital rests on a rather slender thread. However, there is little doubt from his other writings that Hegel never consciously envisioned the transcendence of capitalist relations of production. What is in doubt is whether Hegel's stated views on political issues matter more than what Raya Dunayevskaya called "the self-drive of the dialectic [which] drove through the historic barriers Hegel could not transcend" (Dunayevskaya 1989a: 45). In other words, despite Hegel's political reconciliation with existing reality, does his philosophy, especially his concept of absolute negativity, point toward a transcendence of the logic of capital which is important to recapture for today?

Mészáros himself does not think so. As he sees it, Hegel's all-important concept of Absolute Spirit betrays an uncanny resemblance to the logic of capital. Hegel's Absolute Spirit, as Mészáros sees it, is a self-moving substance which absorbs all contingency into itself. It is subject—a self-acting, self-referential, self-grounded entity. Just as Hegel's Absolute affirms difference while dissolving it into the self-movement of the cognitive subject, so, as many have noted, labor in capitalism affirms natural contingency while dissolving it into the self-movement of abstract labor. Hegel's Absolute Spirit, in this reading, is nothing less than the intellectual equivalent of the logic of capital.

It should nevertheless be noted that while Marx certainly had a sharp critique of Hegel's concept of Absolute Spirit, and even referred to Hegel's *Logic* as "the money of the spirit," he did not have as dismissive an attitude toward Hegel's concept of transcendence through absolute negativity as Mészáros presumes. Marx vigorously critiqued Hegel for dehumanizing the dialectic in treating it as various stages of thought instead of as live corporal humanity. This does not mean, however, that Marx considered Hegel's concept of absolute negativity a mere idealist delusion, as did Feuerbach. In his 1844 "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic," Marx praised Hegel's notion that all forward movement proceeds through absolute negativity and appropriated it for his own vision of the transcendence of the value-form. The "Communist" abolition of private property, he noted, is merely a first negation; to achieve the actual abolition of capitalism requires "the negation of the negation," which he defined as "a thoroughgoing Naturalism or Humanism, which distinguishes itself from both idealism and materialism and is the truth uniting them both" (Marx 1963: 213). By transcending Hegel's dehumanization of the idea in placing live subjects of revolt as bearers of the dialectic, Marx unchained its revolutionary implications which Hegel himself could not envision. This critical appropriation of Hegel's dialectic became the basis for Marx's 40-year development of a philosophy of "revolution in permanence." It proved that far from simply expressing the logic of capital, Hegel's dialectic gives expression to a dialectic of liberation.

Mészáros, on the other hand, rejects Hegel's treatment of the transcendence of alienation on the grounds that it fails to point us beyond the capital-form. The irony here is that for all of Mészáros's critique of Lukács, his reading of Hegel on this score is rooted firmly in Lukács's position (especially as developed in *The Young*

Hegel) that Hegel's dialectic was of service to Marx only insofar as it expresses a dialectic of externalization (or alienation). In *The Young Hegel*, Lukács argued that Hegel's tracing out of the journey of self-consciousness in much of the *Phenomenology of Mind* was of great service to Marx insofar as Hegel's treatment of the journey of consciousness "externalizing" itself through various stages of contradiction mirrors the actual alienation of labor in class society. At the same time, Lukács called Hegel's treatment of the transcendence of externalization in the final chapter of the *Phenomenology* ("Absolute Knowledge") nothing but an idealist mystification, since Lukács held that transcendence is there achieved through the annulment of historic contingency (Lukács 1975: 537-68). Despite Mészáros's critique of Lukács, his rejection of Hegel's concept of transcendence is completely in the spirit of Lukács's overall approach to dialectics.

Lukács never seriously addressed how his total rejection of Hegel's concept of transcendence squared with Marx's 1844 "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic," in which Marx praised the "estranged insight" contained within Hegel's notion of transcendence—namely, that humanity's "true essence" is revealed and made real through "the negation of the negation." Nor does Mészáros tackle this issue, though his work (as we shall soon see) contains much discussion of Marx.

This involves more than splitting textual hairs. At each crisis point in the history of Marxism, socialists have felt the need to return to Hegel to find their way out of seemingly insoluble crises confronting the revolutionary movement. It was true of Lenin in 1914, when in response to the outbreak of World War I and the collapse of the Second International he dove deeply into a study of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. It was true of French Marxists as well as the Frankfurt School in the 1930s and 1940s, who turned to Hegel anew as fascism engulfed Europe. And it was true in the early 1950s in the U.S., when thinkers such as C.L.R. James and Dunayevskaya turned to a study of Hegel's *Logic* and *Philosophy of Spirit* as part of a search for new liberatory concepts to battle the tyranny of the single party state (Dunayevskaya 1989b: 23-52). If Mészáros's reading of Hegel is correct, the only benefit of returning to Hegel today would be to delineate the logic of capital; there would be no point to turning to Hegel to help fill the void in the projection of an emancipatory alternative. If Mészáros is wrong, however, he is

pointing the reader away from the ground needed to work out the problematic which so concerns him.

Mészáros's turn away from Hegel and from philosophy as a whole colors his treatment of many issues in *Beyond Capital*, including his extended discussion of Marx. Mészáros takes us through an array of different writings of Marx, from *The German Ideology* to the *Grundrisse* to the various volumes of *Capital*, as he tries to recapture for today Marx's critique of the notion of the immutability of the capital-form. Though it is not possible to explore all of Mészáros's treatment of Marx here, it is important to single out his reading of Marx's writings in the period in which he wrote *The Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875).

It is not hard to see why Mészáros is drawn to this document, as it is one of the few places where Marx directly addressed the question of what happens after the revolutionary seizure of power. Mészáros sees the *Critique* as the fullest expression of Marx's insistence on envisioning forms of mediation which can propel revolution beyond the mere political overthrow of the bourgeoisie. He writes,

[Marx] insisted that even the most radical negation remains in dependency on the object of its negation.... [T]his is why the socialist revolution could not be conceived as a single act, no matter how radical in intent. It had to be described...as an ongoing, consistently self-critical social revolution, i.e., as a permanent revolution (792).

Mészáros is also one of the very few to single out how Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* illuminates a concept of revolutionary organization. Marx's refusal to sanction the unity of his followers with those of Lassalle, Mészáros argues, shows that remaining faithful to socialist principles counted for far more to Marx than organizational unity—a point largely overlooked by his followers. To Mészáros, this shows that Marx's concept of organization was an integral part of his concept of revolutionary transformation. He writes,

If the socialist revolution is seen primarily as political in character, rather than as a multidimensional, and therefore necessarily 'permanent' social revolution, as Marx defined it, in that case the production and preservation of unity overrides everything in importance. If, however, it is recognized that the acquisition of power is only the starting point for unearthing the real difficulties and contradictions of that transformation 'from top to

bottom'...then the need for genuinely pluralist strategies asserts itself (696).

In light of Mészáros's sensitive reading of Marx's *Critique*, it is all the more disappointing that he is largely dismissive of much of Marx's work from the period in which the *Critique* was written. The 1870s, Mészáros notes, marked the inception of consumer-based economies in which a sector of the laboring classes in the West was increasingly beginning to identify with the established system. Though Marx responded to such reformist pressures adequately enough on a political level in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Mészáros feels that Marx did not take the emergence of mass consumer society seriously enough in his work on Vols. II and III of *Capital*. He says that Marx acted as if the success of the revolutionary movement was assured and therefore felt under little compulsion to rethink the prospects of revolution in light of the global expansion of capitalism:

Marx was in his element at times when the manifestations of crisis were at their most intense. By the same token, he experienced great difficulties from the 1870s (which represented a period of major success in capital's global expansion). Such difficulties presented themselves not only politically, in relation to some important organizations of the working class, but also theoretically, in assessing the new turn of developments. Reflecting this, the intellectual production of his last fifteen years bears no comparison to the previous decade and a half, nor with the fifteen years just before that (480).

Aside from the fact that most of Vols. II and III of *Capital* were written prior to the publication of Vol. I in 1867, and therefore were developed a decade before the new realities which Mészáros feels Marx was not responding to in the 1870s, it is hard to square Mészáros's view of the late Marx from what we now know from his last writings. The "last fifteen years" of Marx's life includes the French edition of *Capital* (1872-75), his studies of North Africa, India, and Moslem society in the *Notebooks on Kovalevsky*, the four lengthy drafts of his Letters to Zasulich on the Russian village commune, and the 400-page *Ethnological Notebooks*, which takes up indigenous pre-capitalist formations among American Indians, East Asians and Australian aborigines. This is not to mention an array of other writings, such as his Preface to the 1882 Russian edition of *The Communist Manifesto*, in which Marx predicted that Russia could achieve a socialist revolution ahead of the West.

None of these writings are dealt with by Mészáros, who repeatedly plays down the significance of Marx's last decade. This is hardly accidental or incidental. Mészáros seems so overburdened with Marx's alleged failure to recognize how capitalism was managing to stave off revolution in the West that he overlooks the new point of departure worked out by Marx in his last writings. For after the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the capitulation of his followers to organizational unity with Lassalleans in 1875, Marx increasingly turned his attention to the "East"—not because he lost his power of intellectual concentration, but because he was looking for revolutionary new beginnings from the technologically underdeveloped world which could act as an impetus to developments in the West as well. If Marx did not spend his last decade analyzing the ways in which capitalism was managing to stabilize itself through the introduction of consumerism, it was because his emphasis was on seeking out ever-new sources of revolutionary transformation. This emphasis on the dialectics of revolution, far from being restricted to his last writings, is the red thread running through entire Marx's forty-year development. Marx responded to moments of setback in revolution, not by emphasizing the tendencies that foster "social stability," but rather by elucidating new nodal points of potential revolutionary transformation. As a number of analysts of Marx's last decade have pointed out, Marx constantly kept his eye on the possibility of newly emerging forces of revolution—whether they be workers or peasants, women or indigenous peoples. As against the notion that Marx moved from a philosophic critique in the 1840s to the "critique of political economy" with *Capital*, the writings of Marx's last decade help indicate that all of Marx's work represents the development of a philosophy of "revolution in permanence."

Mészáros's turn away from a philosophic approach to Marx's work in favor of an emphasis on "a strategic overview of the social complex," on the other hand, tends to subsume how deeply Marx rooted his thought in the dialectics of revolution. This tendency to skip over Marx's rootedness in the dialectics of revolution may in turn explain why the dialectics of revolution as a whole does not figure prominently in *Beyond Capital*. One might think that a work which seeks to delineate a theory of transition would provide some sort of view, however cursory, of the experiences confronted by various efforts at revolutionary transformation in this century. We have seen revolutionary movements arise in Portugal, Angola and

Mozambique, Nicaragua, and elsewhere; it would surely be helpful to explore in what way they have contributed or failed to contribute insights concerning the social and organizational forms of mediation needed to ensure that the expropriation of the capitalists moves toward the abolition of capital itself. Yet such discussion is strangely missing from the book, leaving the reader feeling that Mészáros's call for a theory of transition rings louder than the actual elaboration of one.

This is not to say that Mészáros does not provide crucial insights concerning the overall direction for such a theory of transition. Of special importance is his discussion of women's liberation. Mészáros is fully aware that the value-form of mediation cannot be stripped away so long as hierarchical and sexist attitudes and practices toward women persist. Precisely because the capital-form does not emerge from whole-cloth, but incorporates hierarchies of gender, class and race which precede capitalism, it can only be broken down through a comprehensive revolutionary uprooting which leaves no sector of society untouched. As Mészáros notes, "so long as the vital relationship between women and men is not freely and spontaneously regulated by the individuals themselves..., there can be no question of emancipating society from the crippling impact of alienation" (187).

Yet while such insights make this work more than worth the effort of exploring, one is still left with the impression that Mészáros has done a much better job arguing for the need of a theory of transition than actually supplying one. It is of course hardly possible to expect any one thinker, even in a book of this length, to supply a worked-out answer to the question of how to ensure that the revolutionary seizure of political power ultimately leads to the abolition of capital itself. Mészáros is quite right that achieving this is a formidable task which requires marshaling the fullest energies of today's socialist theorists and activists. The question, however, is whether Mészáros's move away from an Hegelian-centered Marxism leaves him with too narrow a philosophic base from which to work out the question of "what happens after the revolution" which so concerns him. As noted earlier, Marx's 1844 projection of a "thoroughgoing Naturalism or Humanism" which transcends both capitalism and what he called "vulgar communism" was achieved by being deeply rooted in the Hegelian concept of self-movement through "the negation of the negation." For Marx, the Hegelian notion that the transcendence of

alienation proceeds through second negativity was no metaphysical abstraction, as it was for Feuerbach; on the contrary, Marx held that insofar as the idea of second negativity is embodied in forces of revolution like the proletariat, it expresses "the actual movement of history." Given this legacy, can we really meet the need of projecting a *total* alternative to capital today if we turn our backs on the Hegelian Marxist legacy? Is it really possible to work out a comprehensive theory of a post-revolutionary society without the benefit such crucial philosophic concepts as "the negation of the negation?" And can Marx's legacy truly be recaptured for our time if the relationship between philosophy and revolution is not reformulated and reconcretized anew?

There is no doubt that Mészáros's turn away from a philosophic Marxism in favor of an emphasis on a "theory of transition" rooted in "a strategic view of the social complex" flows from his recognition of the limitations of the Hegelian Marxist tradition as exemplified in the work of Georg Lukács. Cogent as much of his critique of Lukács is, however, it is important not to throw out the Hegelian baby with the bath water. While many Hegelian Marxists failed in the end to meet the historic test of projecting a concept of liberation that points to the transcendence, not just of capitalist private property, but of capital itself, there remain crucial dimensions of this tradition that we would reject at our peril. I am especially referring to the development of Marxist-Humanism in the U.S., which emerged from a direct effort to break down the meaning of Hegel's Absolutes for the contemporary freedom struggles. From the early 1950s through the 1980s, Dunayevskaya sought to achieve continuity with Marx's unchaining of the dialectic by elucidating the concept of "absolute negativity as new beginning" for today's ideological and social realities. In discerning the movements from practice of our era as embodying a quest for totally new human relations, she called for a new movement from theory to make this reaching for the "negation of the negation" explicit and real.

Today it may well be hard to see how forces of revolt embody the idea of second negativity. The failures of actual revolutions are so glaring, the collapse of revolutionary movements so obvious, and the crisis in projecting a philosophic expression of the working classes' quest for universality so overwhelming, that the presence of absolute negativity in today's freedom struggles has been obscured. This does not mean, however, that the task of reconstituting

revolutionary Marxism on the basis of a philosophic projection of absolute negativity has come to an end. At a moment when the self-determination of the idea is *not* hearing itself speak, subsumed as it is under the mire of half-way houses ranging from electoral compromises to Million Man Marches, such philosophic projection becomes all the more imperative. In a period of retrogression such as our own, a comprehensive philosophy is needed to help elicit the drive for absolute negativity which lies concealed under the semblance of existing contingencies.

While *Beyond Capital* falls short of this task, Mészáros has nevertheless provided an invaluable study in raising the need to begin working out a comprehensive vision of an alternative future *now*. For that reason, readers today and far into the future will have much to learn from *Beyond Capital*.

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