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**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2751d4dk>

**Journal**

Philosophy and Global Affairs, 2(1)

**ISSN**

2692-790X

**Author**

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**Publication Date**

2022-12-26

**DOI**

10.5840/pga202283026

Peer reviewed

## Louis Dupré, Dialectical Humanist

Kevin B. Anderson

**ABSTRACT:** Louis Dupré's death marks the passing of a philosopher who made a profound contribution to the study of Marx, Hegel, and the wider tradition, and who needs to be reread today. This memorial acknowledges his importance through placing him in conversation with the great Marxist humanist Raya Dunayevskaya.

**KEYWORDS:** Catholic humanism, continental philosophy, Louis Dupré, Hegel, Marx

The January 2022 death at age 96 of philosopher Louis Dupré constitutes a real loss to Marxist and Hegelian thought, and to Continental Philosophy more generally. Even though he was a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Yale University, no obituaries have appeared in the mainstream U.S. media, a shocking development that reveals both their superficiality and their indifference (if not hostility) to Marx and the entire dialectical tradition.

During his long and active career, from the 1960s through the 2010s, Dupré continued to make important contributions, always from a leftwing stance rooted in the finest aspects of Catholic humanism, the type that emerged for his generation in the wake of Nazism and gave birth to tendencies like the worker priests and, later, Latin American theology of liberation. Dupré also battled both the conservative reaction that set in during the 1980s and the anti-humanist and anti-dialectical versions of radical thought that came to the fore in its wake.

I had the privilege of knowing and corresponding with Dupré for nearly three decades, after having first met him as a student of Raya Dunayevskaya at a Hegel Society meeting. In one of his letters to me, in 1995, he took the long view in terms of attacks on Marxism that were proliferating in those days, even on the left: "Marxism as a social and intellectual movement is *not* dead and *will* return. Right now we shall first have to digest the horrors of Eastern European communism." Even if expressed in sober academic language, a certain revolutionary spirit found its way into all of Dupré's work. In a letter to him the following year, I singled out a passage in his just-published study of late medieval and early modern European thought: "In *Passage to Modernity*, I noticed your remarks about Hercules vs. Prometheus among the Romans and even among many of the Greeks, who played down the latter in favor of the former, and your wonderful assessment on p. 113 of Hercules as the 'plodding but reliable servant.'" (See Dupré 1993.) From

behind the scenes, Dupré was instrumental in paving the way for Yale University Press to accept for publication David Norman Smith's forthcoming edition of Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*, and for the National Endowment for the Humanities to fund the preparation by the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* of the writings of the late Marx on anthropology and prehistory and their translation into English, still in progress.

## **Studies on Marx and Critique of Althusser**

Dupré's 1966 book, *Philosophical Foundations of Marxism*, was one of the first full-length studies of the young Marx. His 1983 sequel, *Marx's Social Critique of Culture*, extended itself into the whole of Marx's work. In the latter book, he did not limit himself to academic Marxism, making some probing remarks on Lenin's Hegel Notebooks, for example. While making a critique of the limitations of Lenin's initial treatment of Hegel's second negation or "negation of the negation" (a "return to the old," Lenin wrote), Dupré did not stop there, as most academic Marxists would have done. He also acknowledged that later on in his Notebooks, "Lenin understood this dual nature of the second negation" because he saw the positive in the negative when he wrote of "negation as a moment of connection, as a moment of development, retaining the positive" (Dupré 1983, 151-2).

In his 1983 book Dupré also discussed, with great acuity, a key difference between Marx's dialectic and Hegel's, in an argument that exhibits an affinity to Dunayevskaya's notion of Marx as the philosopher of revolution in permanence: "While for Hegel the second negation completes the cycle and brings the dialectical movement to a temporary conclusion, Marx admits in principle no concluding synthesis, not even a temporary one. Conflicts are not resolved. They intensify until their combined effect explodes in a revolution" (Dupré 1983, 151).

In between his 1966 and 1983 books on Marx, Dupré continued to make contributions to Marxist and Hegelian thought. He was among the first in the English-speaking world to challenge anti-humanist, anti-Hegelian structuralist Marxism in the work of Louis Althusser, later also offering a critique of the poststructuralist philosopher Richard Rorty. Dupré's 1971 review of Althusser's two major books, *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, is a forgotten gem, where he not only sought to stave off the baleful influence of the French Marxist, but also clarified at a deep level the Hegel-Marx relationship. Dupré acknowledges that Althusser, although a member of a Stalinist party, goes beyond the orthodox position that Marx simply reversed Hegel (stood him on his feet). Dupré writes that in his thesis concerning a total diremption between Marx and Hegel, "Althusser concludes that the production of knowledge takes place 'entirely in thought,' just as economic production takes place entirely in the economic realm," a sort of dualism that leads the French philosopher to "a new psycho-physical parallelism in the style of Spinoza" (1971, 262). He adds, "I doubt whether one makes

Marx more intelligible by reading him through the philosophy of Spinoza which he ignored, rather than through that of Hegel to which he paid constant tribute” (ibid). Dupré concludes with the prediction, largely borne out by later developments, that Althusser was pushing Marxism in the direction of empirical sociology: “Dialectic is essentially a logical structure by which one understands the real. To reject, then, any relation between idea and reality as a mere remnant of idealism, is to withdraw the last support of dialectical necessity and to reduce Marxist philosophy to descriptive sociology” (ibid). In this essay, Dupré not only established the ground for a serious critique of Althusser, but also penned in the process a luminous introduction to dialectical reason.

### **Dialogue with Dunayevskaya on Marx and Hegel**

In terms of the U.S. Marxist-Humanist tradition, of which I have been a part, Dupré was one of Dunayevskaya’s key intellectual interlocutors, especially toward the end of her life as she was working on an unfinished book, “Dialectics of Organization and Philosophy.” One of her letters to him—on Hegel, Lenin, and the absolute—developed a new analysis of Lenin’s limitations on the dialectic of the practical idea. Dunayevskaya’s 1986 letter to Dupré was a deep, exploratory text that Peter Hudis and I were most glad to incorporate into our posthumous edition of her writings, *Power of Negativity*.

Dunayevskaya begins by writing that after decades of stressing the creativity of the 1914–1915 Hegel Notebooks, “I’m now changing my attitude toward Lenin” ([1986] 2002, 326). In that 1986 letter, Dunayevskaya takes up a critique of Lenin on negation of the negation in the Hegel Notebooks and of his privileging of the practical idea over the theoretical idea, despite Hegel’s even-handedness in his own treatment of these two concepts in the concluding chapters of the *Science of Logic* (Larger Logic): “Nothing, in fact, led Lenin back to the Idea of Theory and away from dependence on the Practical Idea, not even when Hegel writes: ‘The practical Idea still lacks the moment of the Theoretical Idea. . . .’” ([1986] 2002, 329). Dunayevskaya attributes this problem **mainly** not only to Lenin himself, but also to the truncated version of Hegel’s discussion of the practical idea in another, shorter version of the Logic, the *Encyclopedia Logic* (Smaller Logic), which Lenin seemed increasingly to rely upon as he ended his notes on Hegel’s Logic. That abbreviated version also emphasized the notion of will or volition, which may have encouraged Lenin to fall back into the primacy of practice rather than a fully dialectical relation between the theoretical and the practical idea.

A second point Dunayevskaya makes in this 1986 letter concerns the last volume of Hegel’s *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*

(sometimes called Hegel's "System"), the *Philosophy of Mind* (Spirit). Hegel ended this volume, and his discussion of absolute mind or spirit (*Geist*), with the "eternal idea," something that she reinterpreted in a most revolutionary direction. First, she wrote, "The 'eternal Idea' to me is not eternity, but ceaseless motion, the movement itself" (Dunayevskaya [1986] 2002, 330). It was not, she held, any kind of synthesis or finality, now adding a second point: "I consider that Marx's concept of 'revolution in permanence' is the 'eternal Idea.'" (Dunayevskaya [1986] 2002, p. 331). All of this was of course at variance with the difference Dupré had drawn between Hegel and Marx, quoted above from his 1983 *Marx's Social Critique of Culture*, where, "While for Hegel the second negation completes the cycle and brings the dialectical movement to a temporary conclusion, Marx admits in principle no concluding synthesis, not even a temporary one" (Dupré 1983, 151).

Dunayevskaya shared Dupré's response with a few of her comrades, including me, but I will only paraphrase his letter since I do not feel at liberty to quote it here. Dupré indicated that he did not see any big problems in Hegel's *Encyclopedia Logic* and that therefore the fault in leaning one-sidedly toward practice here was probably Lenin's. On the "eternal idea," with which Hegel ends his *Encyclopedia* or System, Dupré agreed with Dunayevskaya's first point, that the "eternal idea" was no finality but rather unending motion. Here he seemed to change his 1983 view that Hegel tends toward closure even after he has explored a myriad of contradictions, seeing that as what separates his dialectic from that of Marx. But Dupré did not agree with her second point, with the link she was making between Hegel's concluding words on the "eternal idea" and Marx's revolution in permanence. Overall, the debate is about a core issue in Marxist and Hegelian thought as a whole: Is Hegel's philosophy itself revolutionary, or did Marx have to make it into a philosophy of revolution? (Dupré might have shifted his position again a little later, as seen in another 1995 letter to me, after he had received a copy of my book on Lenin and Hegel: "Never before had I realized how revolutionary in the practical order even the most speculative pages of a great philosopher could be.")

It should also be mentioned that, as one of the very few Marx scholars ever to be elected president of the Hegel Society of America, Dupré invited Dunayevskaya to present a paper on Hegel's absolute idea as new beginning at their 1974 meeting. In 1989, two years after her death, he contributed a preface to the Columbia reprint of her *Philosophy and Revolution*, where he linked her to the Hegelian Marxists Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch. At the same time, Dupré wrote, here emphasizing his affinities with Dunayevskaya's humanistic interpretation of Marx: "Yet a notable difference separates Raya Dunayevskaya's from these earlier positions. Dunayevskaya aims at a *total* liberation of the human person—not only from the ills of capitalist society but also from the equally oppressive State capitalism of established communist governments" (1989, xv). This was of course the year

that that brutal system began to collapse, something Dunayevskaya did not live to see.

In this memorial, I have admittedly written about those aspects of Louis Dupré's life and work that have influenced and even moved me and some of my colleagues and comrades over the years, and even that too briefly to give justice to this profound and remarkable thinker. Moreover, I have said nothing about his important work on theology, on Kierkegaard, and many other issues. Still, I believe his Marxist and Hegelian dimensions, and his willingness to have a dialogue on these traditions, not only with other academics, but also with the interpretations of practicing revolutionaries like Lenin or Dunayevskaya, constitute a rich legacy from which radical intellectuals and activists not only can learn, but also build on for the future.

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