

Part VI

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE COLLECTIVE DEVELOPMENT OF MARXIST-HUMANISM

One of the organizational problems that MHI faces is a failure to develop our ideas in writing and speech for publication and dissemination. Although a fair number of Members and Supporters of MHI have begun to put their ideas to paper, many have not continued to develop these ideas to the point where they are clear enough and expressed well enough to be disseminated to the public. As a result, far too little work by us, on theoretical issues and on real-world developments, has appeared in outside publications or in our web journal, *With Sober Senses* (WSS). Nor have we been discussing ideas with one another, on our discussion board and in the comments sections below WSS articles, as much or as regularly as we should.

To help grapple with this problem, we can draw on previous discussions of what Dunayevskaya called "[organizational responsibility for Marxist-Humanism](#)" (see p. 10946). She wrote a fair amount about this topic, especially during her final years, when she was working on a projected book on the dialectics of organization. "[The Self-Thinking Idea Does Not Mean You Thinking](#)," which MHI published shortly after it was founded and which we discussed a bit above, also explores the concept of organizational responsibility for Marxist-Humanism and roots our organization's existence in our willingness to accept this responsibility. These documents are the foundation of the discussion that follows.

To help overcome MHI's failure to develop and disseminate our ideas sufficiently, what requires discussion at this point is *individual* responsibility for the collective development of Marxist-Humanism. MHI's commitment to taking organizational responsibility for the collective development of Marxist-Humanism is just an empty phrase unless its Members and Supporters take individual responsibility to help develop Marxist-Humanism collectively.

In a previous Perspectives thesis, we discussed the need to turn ourselves into practicing revolutionary philosophers. Although we reject the concept of a vanguard party to lead the masses that Lenin embraced, we do need to have a "Bolshevik" attitude in order to become practicing revolutionary philosophers. This has nothing to do with supposed need for professional revolutionaries to lead otherwise non-revolutionary masses. It is about the need for a serious attitude, a commitment to follow through to completion the tasks we have undertaken.

Revolutionary philosophy needs to be intelligible—put in a form in which it is formulated clearly and expressed clearly—if it is to be seized by the masses to create a new society. It does not emerge fully formed; to achieve the needed intelligibility, we have to undertake the "painful labor of the negative." This is true when we speak as well as when we write. We all know that when we speak at a meeting without having done the needed preparation ahead of time, our

contribution will not be as valuable as it could be. We have to do the preparatory work in order to speak about what is most important and to engage directly with the topic under discussion, instead of speaking about what happens to be in our head at the moment that is “related” to the topic. While spontaneity is important, so is theory, which does not arise spontaneously. It is the product of patient, ongoing labor.

Unless we push ourselves to continually rework and develop our ideas as a collectivity, it is next to impossible to concretize our philosophy to the point where it can be seized by the masses in their quest for freedom. And we do need to disseminate our ideas as widely as we can, not because they are fully formed and adequate as a guide to successful revolution, but because they need to be tested by others, and we need to develop them through dialogue with others, in order to take them even further and correct them when necessary. The feedback we get is what exposes our own limited understanding as individuals, and it is what discloses the points where the body of Marxist-Humanist ideas needs to be developed further. The process of projection-feedback-modification is what allows the ideas to become more adequate.

This relationship between us and people outside our organization is crucial. We want our ideas to contribute to the struggle against existing society and for the creation of a new society on the ground of Marx’s humanism. But our ideas can make that contribution only if they are worked out in a relationship with those engaged in the struggle.

But why do we need to rework and develop our ideas *as a collectivity* rather than individually? And why can’t those “best able” to develop ideas be the ones to do it, while others of us likewise do what we are best able to do?

In answer to the first question, we need to stress at the outset that an idea cannot be *developed* at all if one keeps it to oneself. (Is failure to appreciate this one reason why we have not sufficiently developed and disseminated our ideas?) Indeed, a thought cannot even properly be considered an idea until it is formulated in a manner that is intelligible to others.

MHI’s [Principles](#) do state that “[t]he concretization of philosophy takes place in the realm of ideas; it is theoretical,” but this does not mean that ideas are developed primarily in an individual’s own head. Marxist-Humanist ideas have an objective existence in our writings, past and present, and in what Marxist-Humanists other than oneself are thinking. They also exist in the world at large. (This is what Nat Turner was referring to when he denied that his revolt and another slave revolt that broke out at the same time were the result of a conspiracy: “the same idea which prompted me ... prompt[ed] others as well as myself to this great undertaking.”) The development of ideas entails bringing one’s individual thinking into relation with all of this.

We said above that the process of projection-feedback-modification is what allows ideas to become more adequate. This is true not only with respect to the feedback we receive from people we talk to, but also feedback we can receive by engaging with thinkers of the past. In particular, we have to be “in dialogue” with the body of ideas we have inherited from Marx and Dunayevskaya (and others in a more limited sense). We need to do more than seek edification from their writings. We need to work with this body of ideas as the foundation that we seek to build upon, instead of trying to start from scratch with the thoughts that happen to be in our

heads at the moment. The more we recognize that we are building on this foundation, the less we will be afraid of failing due to our individual inadequacies.

Individuals and the contributions they make are vital. But what we need are individuals who regard themselves, not as self-contained atoms, but as valuable individual parts of a collectivity. For example, although several different individuals were principal authors of different parts of these Perspectives, the final product is not a collection of disparate pieces by many individuals; it is a cohesive whole that speaks for us as an organisation. This document was intensively read and discussed to bring it to this point. The insights and experiences of many different people were distilled, refined, and integrated into a unified contribution to the struggle for a new human society. Out of the many comes one.

Thus, part of our answer to the second question is that the development of ideas cannot safely be left as a task to be performed by those “best able” to perform it because they *cannot do the best they are able to do* if they fail to get feedback and critique from the rest of us, as well as information from the rest of us about events in the world, and discussions taking place outside the organization, that they were not aware of.

Another part of our answer to that question is that “[o]nly live human beings can recreate the revolutionary dialectic forever anew,”⁴⁸ and the “best able” will not live forever. The continuation of Marxist-Humanism beyond the active lifetimes of the “best able” demands that we all work hard at the development of ideas and all become better able as a result.

For instance, it is tempting to respond to the frustrations and boredom that we experience when we write and rewrite, and rewrite again, by moving onto something else. The temptation has to be resisted. It is precisely by pushing back against yourself that you will begin to make headway. What is involved here is not sheer willpower, but recognizing that the frustration or boredom is a response to the fact that you have identified some lack of clarity, or contradiction, or other insufficiency in your thinking. The difficulties you encounter when trying to express a thought clearly are signs that the thought itself is not yet sufficiently clear. Evading the problems by moving on might make you feel better, but it will not resolve the problems. If you try instead to pinpoint the exact nature and exact source of the problem, you are likely to then be able to resolve it. And if you do, you have not only completed one more step of a task; you have developed your thinking.

All of us have to become comfortable with being more combative in public, and prepared to make mistakes in public, so that we can learn from these mistakes. And we can admit to having made mistakes. What we cannot do is allow fear of failure and inadequacy to paralyze us and halt our individual and collective development.

Our continuous intervention in battles of ideas is also essential in order to assist the self-development of movements for freedom. To paraphrase Gramsci, we have to continually posit Marxist-Humanist ideas as an element of the contradiction in an effort to prevent ideas that

⁴⁸ Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*. Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991, p. 195.

threaten to divert or thwart movements for freedom from gaining traction within them. Limiting our engagement in public to the people who happen to like what we say does not help struggles from below to withstand retrogressive tendencies.

Thus, when we face opposition to our ideas, we have to resist the temptation to go off in search of other people who are more welcoming of what we say—or, even worse, wait for them to come to us. We evade our responsibility to those struggling for freedom by doing so. There are many tendencies and individuals in the world who dismiss us or ignore us, hoping that we will go away. We should not help them. It is precisely by pushing back that we will start to make headway.

We cannot and should not expect people immediately to accept and agree with us. (If they do, it is often because the basis of the agreement is too superficial to be significant, which is a sign that we have not communicated the full import of what we wanted to say). Marxist-Humanists are not born, but made. Spelling out a disagreement is how a proper engagement begins.

Selected Tasks of Marxist-Humanist Initiative in the Coming Year

1. Fight Trumpism and other far-right phenomena, and support the Resistance and other opposition, on Marxist-Humanist ground. We will do this by protesting, writing, and speaking, to the extent we can. The whole organization will help to carry out this task.
2. Monitor left publications and discussion fora to keep apprised of what the left is writing and discussing. Publicly critique the “soft-on-Trump” left in writings, at meetings, and on the internet.
3. Engage in dialogue with members of Resistance groups, and similar groups outside the US, especially feminist, anti-racist, and immigrants’ rights groups. Our engagement will include elicitation of ideas from below as well as projection and theoretical development of Marxist-Humanism.
4. Engage critically with left populism on Marxist-Humanist ground. Project to the Resistance and similar movements the dangers of economic populism.
5. Fight the embrace of unreason on the left. Fight for pro-truth practices and emphasize the importance of truth and reason for the left. Bring strategies like the Pro-Truth Pledge into the left to help combat post-truth politics.
6. Write essays on areas of Marx and Dunayevskaya’s works that merit MHI’s exploration, explication, and theoretical development, especially in connection with current events or current theoretical disputes.