The Johnston-Forest Tendency in the U.S.

talk by Andrew Anderson at "Legacy of Hegel" Seminar, 20 November 1998

The Johnston-Forest tendency refers to a what was initially a subgroup in the 1940s of the Workers Party, the official trotskyist party in the USA at the time. The history of various Marxist and socialist organisations in America is a rather complex affair to come to terms with, let alone describe in a short amount of time. But, much of the story of the Johnston-Forest Tendency or Johnsonites as they were sometimes referred to is related to disputes between various factions of the Trotskyite parties in the USA. In the words of one historian of social movements in the US: the Trotskyist of the 30s 40s and 50s were "bitterly split among themselves" and "united only in their hatred of Stalin and their utter faith in the vanguard party." These two facets of 1940s Trotskyism were the very issues which the Johnston-Forest Tendency, despite being Trotskyites themselves, brought into play dialectically, using Hegel's logic as a kind of nourishment until finally they broke away from the Trotskyite movement itself.

In talking of the Johnston-Forest Tendency I will mostly be talking about its two main leaders: C.L.R. James, who wrote under the pen name of J.R. Johnson, and Raya Dunayevskaya alias Freddie Forrest, hence the Johnson-Forest label. These two met in the Socialist Workers Party and had in common, firstly an experience theoretically and practically with the so called "Negro Question" and secondly a belief that Russia was not a "workers state" but the ultimate example of State capitalism. This conception went against the norma Trotskyist position, and indeed Trotsky's own position that the USSR was a "deformed" workers state. Hence it was a relatively new concept then and certainly did not really mesh with the Socialist Workers Party. They joined forces to lead a small faction within the party to work out the ramifications of this position. Since one of the ramifications of there position was, in short, that there was no socialist society existant anywhere in the world, they saw that a return to Marxist philosophy was necessary. Their return to Hegel's philosophy as lying at the basis of Marx's philosophy was due in large part to Dunayevskaya, who was deeply emersed in both Marx's and (being a Russian speaker), Lenin's writings in Russian.

But before I go on I should give a few biographical details.

Raya Dunayevskaya was born in the Ukraine and brought to the USA by her parents as a child. She joined th revolutionary movement at the age of 13 and in the 1920s was involved with the American Negro Labor Congress and the newspaper Negro Champion. She was Trotsky's secretary in 1937 in Mexico, but left him in 1939. She died in 1987. This brief summary is essentially what is written in the introduction to the collection of Dunayevskaya's writings and entitled The Raya Dunayevskaya Collection which has been published on 8 rolls of microfilm and contains a huge amount of material, should anyone want to follow up on her writings. Her
major theoretical works, can be found in three books: *Marxism and Freedom* (published 1958 which includes a translation of Lenin's *Notes on Hegel's Logic* and Marx's *Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic*), *Philosophy and Revolution* - (published 1973) and *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Revolution and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (which came out in 1982). Many of her writings are also presented by the journal of News and Letters Committees - a group she started after breaking with James. For those of you on the net this group has a web site.

I now move on to James, who is the more famous of the two. A charismatic man, his life was interesting and multifaceted. I have come across a number of recent biographies on him dealing with different facets of his life. He was born in 1901 in Trinidad. Went to a good school, got involved in writing and leftist politics, then moved to England in 1932. There he joined the Independent Labour Party. He published several works on the history of black activism in the West Indies, notably in 1938 *The Black Jacobins*, and had a casual job as a cricket columnist for the *Manchester Guardian*. In 1936 his play play *Toussaint L'Ouverture* - about a slave uprising in the west indies during the french revolution stared Paul Robeson. For a while he was editor of the Journal *International African Opinion*. In 1938 he moved to the US on a temporary visa (in the cricket off season) and ended up staying there for a decade or so (which is roughly the period we are concerned with) until he was kicked out by the authorities. After another stay in England he returned to Trinidad in the 60s then back to England in the 80s. He died in 1992. Throughout his life he was an activist, a writer and a pamphleter of great skill.

C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya met initially in the *Socialist Workers Party*. This was the official Trotskyist party in the US which started in the late 30s, with Trotsky himself as patron. It was a fairly small organisation with a somewhat bohemian culture and, compared to the Communist Party, fairly diverse.

James soon became unhappy with the party's lack of interest in Black activism. Dunayevskaya also, developing her critique of state capitalism, they began to apply it not only to capitalist society and stalinist russia but to the bureaucratic elements in the labour movement itself. James publish criticisms of the SWP and in 1940 James, Dunayevskaya and others split from the SWP and joint the *Workers Party*. With the Hitler-Stalin pact, many people turned away from the Communist Party and Marxist parties in general. After Trotsky's death the *Socialist Workers Party* was also in crisis. James and Dunayevskaya, as I mentioned earlier did not agree that Russia was a "deformed worker's state" but rather represented state capitalism.

During the war, despite the crisis of the stalinist parties and the rise of patriotism due to the war effort, there was actually a rise in industrial disputes due to the fact that, on the one hand industrialisation and production increased due to arms production, and secondly that a new industrial labour force containing many *blacks* and *women* was required to replace the soldiers and to supliment the work force already there. Becaue many of these were new to the labour movement the discipline built up over time by the unions, especially under the stricter labour laws imposed by Roosevelt's "New Deal" economic policies was often
lacking. Along with these factors there was a sharp rise in the level of automation in the factories, making factory work particularly alienating. These factors meant that there was revolutionary hopefulness for groups such as the Workers Party who, despite being very small, did have some success in organising industrial action. For James and Dunayevskaya it was also a chance to see the possibility of spontaneous action which, largely due to the unorganised nature of the disputes, gave credence to their position that it was the workers themselves and not parties who were the most important force in the revolutionary struggle. James and Dunayevskaya set up a kind of study group within the Workers Party, initially to work on the idea of State Capitalism. Dunayevskaya set to work analysing the Russian economy using all statistical sources and economic documents available to her. Along with a look at overall production in the USSR and in comparison to the world economy she analysed its internal workings in terms of production incentives, taxes and social classes and so on. She concluded that although the economy was "planned" it did show most of characteristics of a capitalist economy, and these were not compatible with an economy "i transition" to a workers state, not even as a variety of temporary development such as Lenin's New Economic Policy. For example, prices were not fixed by the use values of goods, but by the quantity of labour socially necessary for their production. Prices, although set by the state, were in fact not stable, and crises, as in capitalist economies, were regularly occurring. This was one step beyond theories of state capitalism put forward by other writers who focused only on the competion of the Russian economy with the rest of the capitalist world.

In 1943 Stalin's theoreticians themselves declared that the "theory of value" - (that is cost of production based on socially necessary labour time) was necessary in a socialist society. After this avowal coming from the Kremlin itself the Johnston-Forest group had no need to prove this point any longer.

One thing, however, that Dunayevskaya got out of this study of the Russian economy and her emersion in Marx's texts was her discovery of the importance of Marx's 1844 Manuscripts and Lenin's Notebooks. The need to defend the philosophical basis of Marxism became imperative to the Johnston-Forest group especially at this time, when the theoretical position of the USSR was openly hostile to the Dialectic as Marx himself had expressed it in Chapter One of Das Kapital.

About this time C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya were joined by a new member. Grace Lee, who had been involved in black politics in Chigago came from a highly educated chinese family and was competent in the German language. She took on the role translating Marxian texts. The three became leaders of what was to become the Johnston-Forest Tendency, more than just a study group. And between the mid 40s up until 1955 they put out many publications expressing their point of view as a unified group. They were also involved in political action of various sorts. After the war, however, their dissatisfaction with the Workers Party grew and in 1947 the Johnston-Forest tendency left.
the Workers Party, publishing several documents outlining their dissatisfaction. One of them, a large pamphlet entitled The Invading Socialist Society (after Engles - maybe Bill or someone else can identify where exactly this comes from), put forward their view that a stage had been reached in history, dialectically, at which the proletariat was ready, on a world scale, to revolt "not just against politics and the distribution of surplus value, but but against value production itself." It was not only capitalism and imperialism, but bureaucracy within so called socialist society, and within the international labour movement itself at all levels which was standing in the way of spontaneous proletarian revolt. The Invading Socialist Society, carried a forceful critique of not only the stalinist parties, but also those parties which expended all their energies in merely fighting stalinist parties and fighting each other: What was needed was for a new recognition, which was not forthcoming, from the Worker's Party

of the powers of the masses - the fostering of a mass society, and in the USA an acknowledgement of mass American culture and indeed cultural minorities. In the words of the The Invading Socialist Society:

"The genuine mass organisation of the American proletariat, the socially most advanced social entity the world has ever seen, will show that the Stalinism of the stalinist parties is merely a subjective expression of the world proletariat, instinctively unifying and consolidating social forces in the face of dangers and tasks. This is the invading socialist society of our day"

The Johnston-Forest tendency therefore left The Worker's Party over the issue of the role of the Vanguard party, and because of the intransigence of the WP and SWP on the basic issues.

It was at this point, after leaving the WP and before once again joining the SWP (in 1950) that the Johnston-Forest Tendency set to work on interpreting Hegel. In 1948 C.L.R. James, while in Nevada where, on account of the lax divorce laws, he had gone to legalise a divorce from his first wife, did a comprehensive reading of Hegel's Logic - writing notes which were later distributed among the Tendency members. These were published in 1980 under the title Notes on Dialectics.

Notes on Dialectics can be read as an exegesis of Hegel's Science of Logic using the history of revolutions as an instrument. Although the opposite of this process, using the logic to read history, is what a Marxist would usually aspire to. Dunayevskaya's later theory of theory and praxis would, however, affirm that this process should go in this direction. James's notes are a concrete introduction to the necessarily abstract language of Hegel's "realm of pure thought", despite the sometimes abstruse historical connections he makes. In the course of reading Notes on Dialectics one can feel from the writing the process whereby "crude materialist" prejudices against Hegel's "idealism" are slowly shed. This standpoint is alluded to by Marx in the preface to the second edition of Capital and is also detectable in Lenin's gradual warming to the Dialectic in his Conspectus of Hegel's Logic. Most of the explication of Hegel in Notes on Dialectics is done by quoting large passages and then relating them to ideas James has about revolution.
James's proposition that there is no further place in the labour movement for the party could be seen as parallel to what would seem to be the Johnston-Forest Tendency's brave isolation at the time, being the minority of neither the WP nor the SWP. In James's words: "the conflict of the proletariat is between itself as object and itself as consciousness, the party." The trotskyites should not waste their energy in labeling the stalinist parties "tools of the Kremlin," for to James, Stalinism was not an accident (as much of the trotskyite movement at the time would have designated it) but rather it was the "last opposition to be overcome".

In fact as he reaches each new stage of the *Objective Logic* (part 1 of Hegel's *Science of Logic*) James is able to affirm this. To demonstrate this I'll try to replicate some of his argumentation to the best of my ability. (Be prepared to be confused! I feel like I'm on shaky ground here!) In the realm of "Being" Stalinism is the "Non Being" of the becoming of the proletariat as it becomes determinate in leninism and the 3rd International. This means that it is essentially NOTHING being the other of Leninism - the essentiality of the proletariat. And the proletariat at each stage of its development, is always in relation to, that is - differs essentially; comes into contradiction with - its other half: CAPITAL. But this relation labour/capital is always the specific labour/capital relation of each epoch or stage of the history of the struggle. Either side of the relation will differ, at a given point of time. Thus the particular capital of the 1940s stalinist era is in relation to the specific proletariat of this era. The two are in contradiction and in order to APPEAR (and stalinism is merely an appearance here) the relation must "fall to the ground" (a technical term in Hegel) as has happened with the Revolutions of the 19th century and each of the Internationals. This collapsing, on side of capital (in crises) and of the Proletariate - in counterrevolutions, and warfare, serves only to make **actual** the concept of the proletariat and brings it into "EXISTENCE". It is the "ground" or reason for the concept of the proletariat's **ACTUALITY**. At this point there is no transition of one side of the essential contradictory relation of capital to the other side: the proletariat. The bureaucracies and parties have taken on an existence of their own and no longer express the movement of the proletariat. to quote James:

"the fact that all these Internenals lack so much, struggle and collapse, this is proof of the existence of an Absolute... as we watch them striving, failing but always incorporating, we recognize that they are expressing a movement to something prior to their contingent appearance."

And likewise on the other side of the labour/capital relation, the law of surplus value in State Capitalism has transcended the contradictions of property such that it functions in both the competitive capitalist world as well as the bureaucratised planed economy, and has become total in the imperialist penetration even into the ideologies of the bureaucracies of the american labour movement. We have a reciprocity that bespeaks of an absolute realtion.

Much of all this terminology is jargon from the *Science of Logic*.

But to prove the truth of the **absolute concept** of the proletariat requires the subjective
logic (part 2 of Hegel's *Science of Logic*), which starting with its notion in its universality concretizes it, culminating in the absolute Idea - a point to which James does not push.

I shan't go any further into *Notes on Dialectics* except to say that James designates this absolute as the universal of socialism, and the process in achieving this universal as being Reason, as opposed to "the mere Understanding" - what hegel designates as thought using finite categories - for James, the limit of "Bourgeois" science.

Now to return to the Johnston-Forest Tendency: after a short period not affiliated with any party the Tendency once again joined the Socialist Workers Party. They brought out another book along the same line of argument as *The Invading Socialist Society*. This book, written largely by James was called *State Capitalism and World Revolution*. It argued against holding up NATIONALIST communist regimes (for example Tito's Yugoslavia) as models of Socialism. It called for the break down of bureaucracies in the American labour movement and claimed that, despite its apparent difference from the large workers parties in Europe, the American union movement was more party than union and had great revolutionary potential, if only it could find popular expression for its urge towards the "UNIVERSAL OF SOCIALISM" which it instinctively strove for.

In 1952 the authorities caught up with C.L.R. James and he was expelled from the US for having no visa. In the meanwhile a three way correspondence on Hegel between the leaders of the Johnston-Forest group was bearing fruit.

Raya Dunayevskaya in particular had been making progress with her search for the authentic philosophical origins of Marx. In 1953 after the death of Stalin she discovered what, to her, was the revolutionary point of Hegel's philosophy - that Hegel's philosophy is by nature revolutionary. That the process of the Absolute coming to itself by the negation of the negation, this self movement, had been misinterpreted by post Marx Marxists who contrary to Marx's understanding of the "dialectic of negativity" interpreted dialectics as thesis, antithesis, synthesis. The negation of the negation however, allows for continual movement from one concept to another, as it does from one historical moment to another. Dunayevskaya says of the climax of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "...this movement through double negation characterises the transcendence of each stage of alienation as well as the whole Science of the Experience of knowledge, not excluding the absolute". That is, the absolute is itself negatable. Marx's "turning of Hegel on his head", does not imply that Hegel's philosophy is simply to be changed from Idealism to Materialism - this would mean that thought and theory would be impossible. Rather there can be a "movement from practice to theory" culminating in a new absolute as each new concept is born in a moment of freedom, of the Absolute coming to know itself in its own negation of the negation of itself. The negativity comes from "below", from the masses. The one thing she wanted to do was to understand why Marx and Lenin had not abandoned completely Hegel's philosophy.
In 1955 James and Dunayevskaya went their own separate ways. James in the direction of cultural critique, Dunayevskaya set up *News and Letters* and went on to develop her theory of Marxist Humanism.