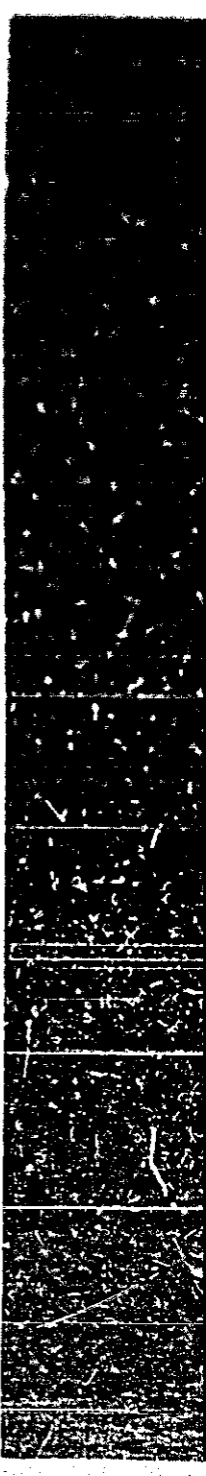


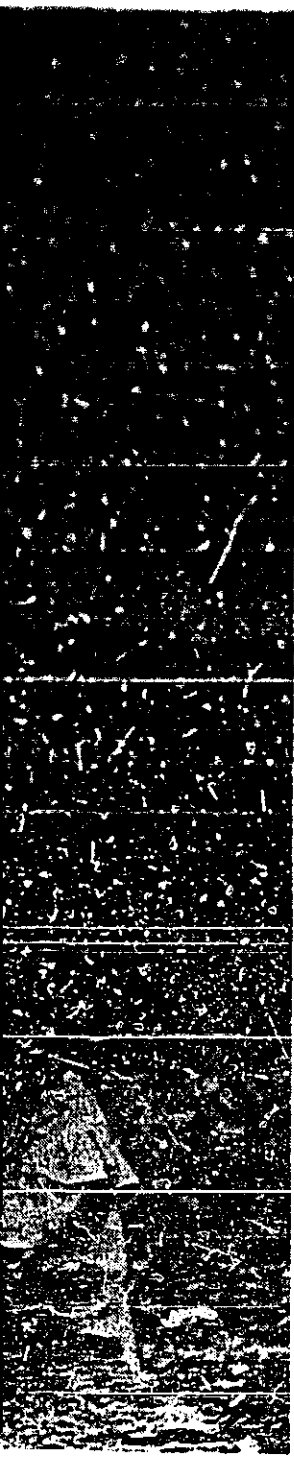


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Black Women



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Cover Photo: Women hulling rice with mortar and pestle on
Sapelo Island, Georgia, ca. 1915. Courtesy of Georgia Dept. of
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**Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution:
Reaching for the Future
by Raya Dunayevskaya
New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1985**

Diane Lee



Raya Dunayevskaya (l) and Ethel Dunbar (r) at Marxist Humanist Archives Exhibit and Lecture, Wayne State University, March 21, 1985. Dunbar was the "Way of the World" columnist of *News and Letters* in the '50s and '60s.

From the title of the new work by Raya Dunayevskaya—*Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution: Reaching for the Future*—the reader may not suspect that Black women as workers, as thinkers, as activists, help to form its core and are integral to the passions and forces of revolution discussed within. And yet Black women are a powerful dimension of this book. This is not merely for the sake of "touching another base" by including Black working women. Rather, in these pages one becomes witness to Black women striving to have new human relationships, striving for a new society, and thus integral to any truly revolutionary "reaching for the future:" in Nigeria, market women call a strike that confronts both British colonialism and their own chiefs; in Detroit a Black woman auto worker poses questions of color, class and gender to white women's liberationists; in Soweto, a 16-year-old Black woman challenges apartheid by her refusal to accept a subservient heritage. Working out the relation of these "Subjects of revolution"—Black women, all women, indeed all humanity—to what Dunayevskaya calls a *philosophy of revolution*, beginning with *Marx's Marxism*, forms the central thrust of this 35-year collection of essays, talks and letters. That relation is what she terms "dialectics of revolution."

While reading this work three categories that Dunayevskaya has developed in relation to Black women were particularly striking: 1) the concept of Black working women as "reason" of revolution; 2) the forcefulness of the international dimension of Black women and 3) the challenge Black women have issued to the revolutionary movement, especially to women's liberation theorists and theorists within the Black movement. In the essay entitled "The Women's Liberation Movement

as Reason and as Revolutionary Force," Dunayevskaya quotes a Black working woman, Ethel Dunbar, which illustrates how Black women challenge narrow concepts of women's liberation that fail to include the dimension of color as well as gender:

"I was at a discussion several weeks ago on the question of women's rights . . . where one white woman, an old politico, said she had just left a caucus in her union which had been discussing the problems of women in the shop. The question came up of white women fighting for higher pay, because even Black men were getting higher wages than white women. Being a Black woman, it made me angry to have it put that way, because it sounded as though white women thought they should make *more* than Black men. Black men do hard, hard work. And there is something wrong with that whole way of thinking. . . White women have to make sure that they do not let white men mix up their thinking." (*WLDR*, p. 24)

Ethel Dunbar is critiquing an elitist attitude that is prevalent not only among some women's liberationists, but also among some who consider themselves revolutionaries.

Dunayevskaya takes up the international dimension of Black women in a number of different ways. One is her discussion of the Igbo Women's War:

" . . . take the African continent where, it was not the educated men, but illiterate women who added a new page to history, when, in 1929, the British imperialists in Eastern Nigeria decided to tax the women. They got so furious they went on spontaneous strike—which was, of course, called a 'riot.' The great Aba riots. It was not only spontaneous, it was against all the advice of everyone, including the educated males. It was not only against British imperialism, but against their own African chiefs, who had not defended them. Above all they crossed all tribal lines. And they won, though not until after 40 women were killed and countless others injured. . . ." (*WLDR*, pp. 50-51)

Diane Lee is a Black feminist writer for *News & Letters* newspaper, published at 59 East Van Buren, Chicago, Illinois, 60605.

Another discussion of Black women internationally comes in an essay entitled "The Trail from Marx's Philosophy of Revolution," in which Dunayevskaya singles out a young South African woman Miriam Gafoor who spoke during the Soweto Rebellion in 1976: "Apartheid has become an insult to our human dignity. Our whole being rebels against the whole South African experience. . . I am 16-years-old and have been locked up, refused food and interrogated. . . We, the youth of South Africa, reject the subservient heritage that has been handed down to us." (WLDR, p. 55)

Even the index categories, such as under "Africa," reveal the international dimension:

"Africa (see also Algeria; Angola; Dunayevskaya; Egypt; Eritrea; Ethiopia; Gambia; Guinea-Bissau; Liberia; Morocco; Mozambique; Revolution; Self-determination; South Africa; Women) Namibia; Portuguese Revolution, and; Black America, two-way road to; African National Congress see South Africa; African students in China"

Dunayevskaya's philosophy is concrete—so concrete that her writings on Africa bring out the revolts in specific countries and show that for her the continent of Africa is by no means a monolith.

Perhaps most provocative and revealing of how Dunayevskaya sees the dimension of Black women as being integral to the dialectics of revolution is her discussion of Black women challenging concepts within the revolutionary movement. In her essay entitled "The Black Dimension in Women's Liberation," she quotes a Black woman intellectual, Doris Wright, who raises questions of the relation of Black liberation and Black women's liberation and of what happens after the revolution:

"I'm not thoroughly convinced that Black Liberation, the way it's being spelled out, will really and truly mean *my* liberation. I'm not sure that when it comes time to 'put down my gun,' that I won't have a broom shoved in my hands, as so many of my Cuban sisters have" (WLDR, p. 51)

Dunayevskaya then comments: "She was posing the question of what happens *after*. That is what we have to answer *before*, in the practice of our own organizations, our own thought and our own activity." The questions that Black women are raising are universal and the author pinpoints this historically, internationally as well as in the United States.

Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution: Reaching for the Future has a wide ranging discussion of Black women, but it is not a book "about" Black women. If Dunayevskaya can write with insight about Black women,

it is because she has dug deeply into the interrelationship of women's liberation and a dialectics of revolution and found Black working women within.

The entire work is given its direction, not through a chronological presentation of the essays, but rather because, as Dunayevskaya notes in her "Introduction/Overview," ". . . each of the four parts into which the essays have been divided encompasses the whole three decades (35 years); thus, each involves the totality." The real unifying dimension of this totality is philosophy. Dunayevskaya calls this philosophy Marxist-Humanism. It encompasses voices of revolt speaking for themselves unseparated from the full articulation and projection of Marx's Marxism recreated for today. Marxist-Humanism is against state-capitalism as in Russia and China and against private capitalism as in the U.S. Dunayevskaya sees the source of philosophy not only among those who call themselves theorists but among all of the new passions and forces. One can see her concept of philosophy's relation to voices of revolt in her most provocative presentation of Sojourner Truth:

"Today, when Women's Liberation is not just an Idea whose time has come but an actual movement, we naturally think that past history is but 'backdrop,' and yet if we look at even so simple a question as choosing a name and how we think we have achieved a great revolution by adopting our mother's maiden name instead of our father's name, we have to stop and compare that with what Sojourner Truth did. . . She asked (God) what she should call herself. . . ? His answer was supposed to have been: 'Sojourn the world over and tell the truth about American democracy: The Declaration of Independence says all men are free, but obviously they mean only white men, and women don't seem to count at all. Go tell the world the truth! Since that was precisely the answer she was waiting to hear, she called herself from that moment on 'Sojourner Truth.' Which one of us. . . has chosen a name that expresses our whole philosophy?" (WLDR, p. 54)

What makes Dunayevskaya's study so thought-provoking is the contradictory reality we face today. On the one hand, there is Reaganism and Hitler's visage in apartheid South Africa. On the other, there are women's voices and actions in deep opposition globally to class-ridden, sexist, racist societies. Dunayevskaya forces us to begin to clear our heads, to look into our own revolutionary history as Black women activists and thinkers, not merely as "backdrop" but as part of a historic process that will aid us in working out a philosophy of liberation that together with today's "new passions and forces" will reach for a human society.

Jan. 3, 1986

Dear Sister-Comrades,

The new year has really brought with it something so original that I believe it can serve as a model as to how to review WLDOR from many different aspects, very concretely, and yet give a view of the totality of the work. I am referring to Diane Lee's review of WLDOR for a Black journal. Let the very first paragraph of her review speak for itself: "From the title of the new work by Raya Dunayevskaya -- Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution: Reaching for the Future -- the reader may not suspect that Black women as workers, as thinkers, as activists, help to form its core; are integral to the passions and forces of revolution discussed within. And yet Black women are a powerful dimension of this book. This is not merely for the sake of "touching another base" by including Black working women. Rather, in these pages one becomes witness to Black women striving to have new human relationships..."

Diane then becomes more concrete by pointing to specific Black women and quoting them. This includes everybody from Ethel Dunbar to the Igbo women, from South African Mariam Gafoor keeping them all inseparable from women the world over: "If Dunayevskaya can write with insightfulness of Black women, it is because she has dug deeply into the interrelationship of women's liberation and a dialectics of revolution and found Black working women within. The book takes us on a journey which stretches around the world -- Japan, China, South Africa, Poland, Russia, Australia, Argentina as well as much of the United States."

And finally her first paragraph brings her whole review down to the concrete (objective) situation we face today: "What makes Dunayevskaya's study so (thought) provoking is the contradictory reality we face today. On the one hand Reaganism and Hitler's visage in apartheid South Africa. On the other these women's voices and actions that are in deep opposition globally to class-ridden, sexist, racist societies." In fact the only suggestion I have for Diane's great contribution is to see whether Sage would also agree to publish a picture, the one taken at the WSU March 21 Archives meeting of Effie and me. I will send this picture down to her right now.

The reason I was so very impressed with this review is that because WLDOR covers all together too many periods and subjects even if it is concentrating on one subject. It makes it hard to write a review that is directed to whatever audience one has in mind. One of the reasons I was originally impressed with Shila's review in N&L is that it took up youth. If something like that could get into a youth magazine then it would achieve this new opening that Diane has.

Yours,

Raya

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