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Dear Friends,

Yes, please do start my subscription with the Workers Issue. I am very interested in your journal and would like to know more about it. My long study as well as activity with Black women began long before the Women's Liberation Movement formally began, and it wasn't by any means limited to the feminist movement. Rather, it was precisely because I felt that Woman was not only a revolutionary force, but Reason itself in the development of civilization, that I started, not with woman scholars originally, but with the working women. For example, I used the following experience to prove how far in advance the so-called ordinary Black women were to the so-called extra-ordinary white intellectual women at the very start of what would become a founder of women's liberation. I'm referring to Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex as it first appeared in France before it was translated into English. I was so utterly infuriated at her existentialist statements that we women haven't produced a Shakespeare in the literary world or a revolutionary like Lenin in the political world and that since men nevertheless are the ones who are oppressing us, it is up to them to free us. I proceeded to translate this to a Black factory worker I was working with. I was happy to see that not only was she just as infuriated as myself, but the first words out of her mouth was, "gee, what's she doing to us women, is exactly what white men were always doing to Black men. They were always talking about this being the white man's burden." She proceeded to say that no one ever got their freedom who didn't fight for it, and anyone who just gives it to you can also take it back, and she refused to wait until the men would give it to her.

Your issue on Workers was quite magnificent and I look forward to both that issue and the following issues.

Sincerely Yours,

*Raya Dunayevskaya*

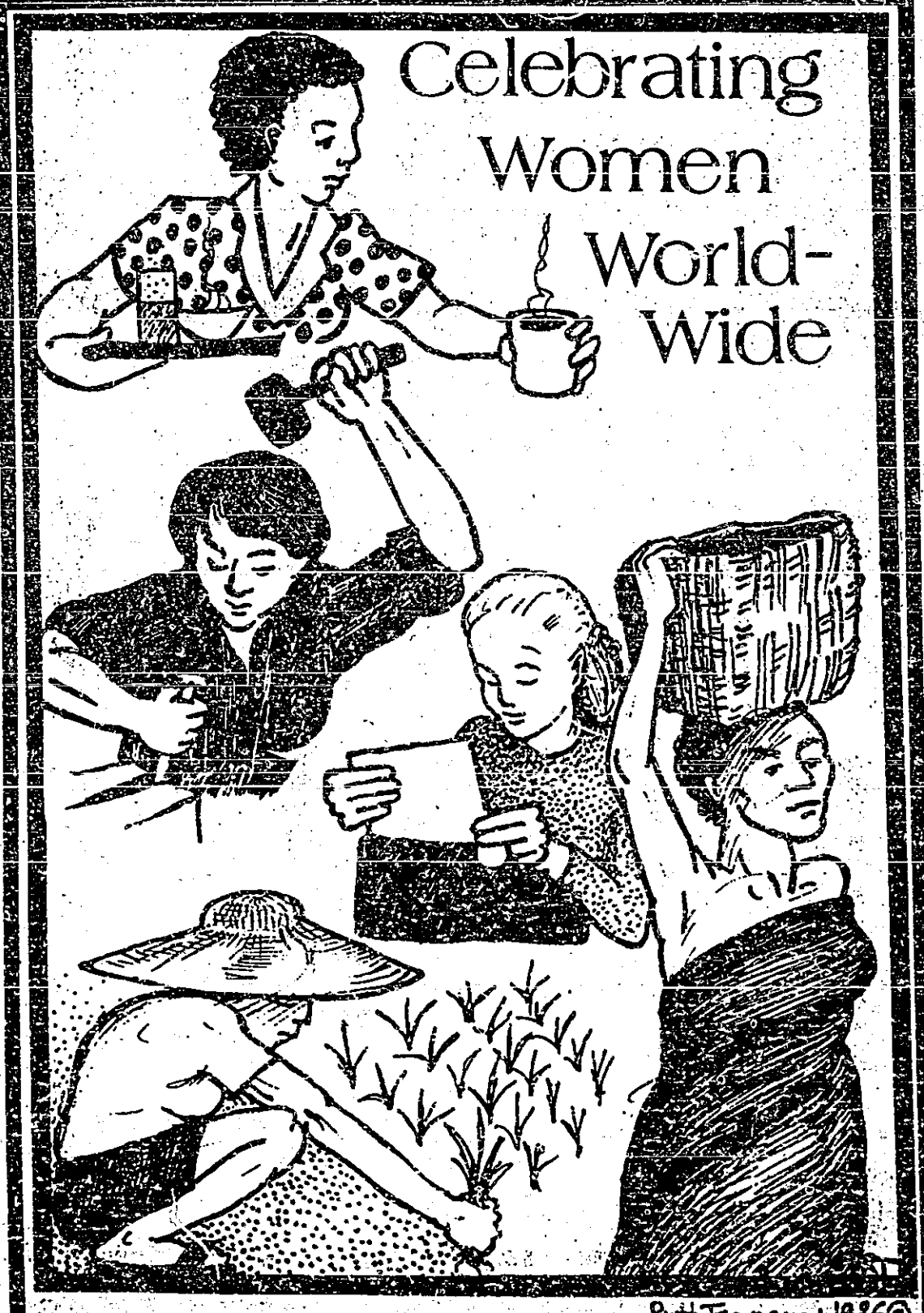
P.S. Under separate cover I'm asking News & Letters to send you a copy of the pamphlet where I've summarized 30 years of my work in editing that newspaper.

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# off our backs

**\$1 a women's newsjournal**



Ruth Trevanion 1986©

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## review

# Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution: Reaching for the Future

*Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution: Reaching for the Future: A 35-Year Collection of Essays--Historic, Philosophic, Global, by Raya Dunayevskaya, Humanities Press International, 1985, \$15.95. Available in a special offer to cob readers for \$12.95 from Mens & Letters, 53 East Van Buren, #707, Chicago, IL 60605.*

This collection of some of the writings of Raya Dunayevskaya on Women's Liberation will introduce the work of this unique woman philosopher-activist to a wider feminist audience. I am especially pleased to be reviewing this book for the March (International Women's Day) issue of off our backs, because the pages of this work are filled with the voices, passions and deeds of women all over the world, moving, thinking, "reaching for the future." This global dimension of Women's Liberation is integral to the development of Dunayevskaya's philosophy of Marxist-Humanism, her search -- in philosophy and in life -- for paths to a total uprooting of what Marx had called "the prehistory of humanity."

That uprooting is not a utopian dream, but today's concrete and urgent need. It is the focus of this book, with Dunayevskaya grounded in the concept of history not as "past" but as the live "history-in-the-making" that we are shaping now, a living interrelationship of past/present/future. This concept is evident in the solidarity message Dunayevskaya sent to the Iranian feminists in March 1977, following their magnificent International Women's Day demonstration against Khomeini. It began:

"In Spring 1968 -- when the 1906 Constitutional Revolution everyone is talking about today was still alive, and a Women's Anjuman [Soviet] was still most active, especially in Tehran -- New York garment workers declared March 8 to be Women's Day. The following year, in support of the locked-out Triangle Shirtwaist Makers, the mass outpouring became known as the 'Uprising of the 20,000'; that so inspired the German Working Women's movement that its leader Clara Zetkin, proposed to the Marxist International that March 8 become an international Women's Day. Today, you -- the daring women of Iran -- have opened a new chapter in the Iranian Revolution of 1979... (p. 235).

Tragically, that chapter two of the Iranian Revolution did not develop, the call of the Iranian women to deepen the revolution -- to not stop at the overthrow of the old, but continue towards the development of new human relationships -- was not heeded by the Iranian left, who preferred instead to narrow the struggle to "anti-imperialism," tailoring Khomeini.

Dunayevskaya's March 1979 Political-Philosophic Letter, "Iran: Uprooting of, and Contractions in, Revolution," discusses the creative spontaneity of the Iranian masses, and critiques the narrowness of the freedom vision of the left. Indeed, this whole book, in tracing through the dialectics of revolution, addresses itself to the haunting problematic of our age: why have there been so many scoured revolutions, so many revolutions transformed into

their opposite -- one more tyranny? Why has the creative passion for freedom in our world not been able to achieve freedom?

The essays, talks, and letters collected here cover a period of some 35 years. Well before the rise of the contemporary Women's Liberation Movement, Dunayevskaya recognized the dimension of Women's Liberation as an independent passion and Reason for freedom in the post-World War II world. Her 1953 essay, "On Women in the Post-War World, and the Old Radicals," discusses working class women's demands for new relations both in the factory and at home, and their challenge to the radical parties who "failed to recognize this new concrete revolutionary force in society, but that force recognized them, for it had set up new standards by which to judge this so-called revolutionary movement." (pp. 32-33)

The book's "Introduction and Overview" places the uniqueness of contemporary feminism within the context of the post-war age and the many new beginnings for freedom that arose then. All were characterized by a search for freedom pathways that reached beyond established ideologies and organizations: the 1949-50 strike of American coal miners against the introduction of Automation, in which the miners were asking the question of what kind of labor is human labor; the revolts in East Europe against Communist totalitarianism, with the slogan-raised threat of "Bread and Freedom"; the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama, which challenged centuries-old ways of thinking, doing, and relating; and the national liberation revolts in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, signalling the birth of a whole new "Third World."

Dunayevskaya characterizes the maturity of these freedom movements as "a movement from practice that is itself a form of theory." The task of the revolutionary theoretician is then not only to come up to what the masses in motion have discovered, but to work out a new relationship between the movement from practice and movement from theory. In the "Introduction and Overview" she writes:

"I had been feeling that the whole post-World War II generation had been raising totally new questions ever since the end of that war had solved none of the myriad crises brought on by the Depression and the rise of fascism which had led to the war. Put another way, new forces of revolution were challenging the theoreticians to come up with nothing short of a new form of cognition, a new way of life. Instead, they were being saddled with new political tyrannies; new forms of mass destruction, a new stage of production, and a total way of nuclear terror and death." (p. 11)

Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution shows how Dunayevskaya took responsibility for developing the new freedom dimensions she heard speak in those 1950s into a philosophy of self-development and revolution; and how that philosophy of revolution has grown deeper and more concrete over the last three decades, in confrontation with both revolutions and counter-revolutions, including the counter-revolution that has emerged from within the revolutionary movement itself.

The essays in this book are not arranged in chronological order. They are, instead, grouped into categories comprising four parts, the titles of which show the book's focus and movement. Part I is "Women, Labor and the Black Dimension"; Part II -- "Revolutionaries All!"; Part III -- "Sexism, Politics and Revolution -- Japan, Portugal, Poland, China, Latin America, the U.S. -- Is There an Organizational Answer?"; and Part IV -- "The Trail to the 1980s: The Missing Link -- Philosophy -- in the Relationship of Revolution to Organization."

Three strands of thought seem to me to run throughout the book, defining its unity and perspective:

(1) Women's Liberation speaks in many voices.

We hear those voices in these pages, from the miners' wives in a 1950 coal mine strike in West Virginia (in which Dunayevskaya was active) to the feminists of the 1960s telling the Left, "Don't tell us about discrimination everywhere else; and don't tell us it comes only from class oppression; look at yourselves"; from Manuela Saucedo,

a young Ixil Indian woman from Guatemala protesting, "The rich have always treated us Indians as people who are crazy, who can't think," to Alina Pienkowska, an activist in Poland's Solidarnosc, who concludes, "We must struggle more for the women's cause"; from the Black working class women who speak here, with a unifying vision of the inseparability of sex, class, and race struggles, to a 16-year-old Miriam Gafoor in South Africa who defiantly tells a Supreme Court judge, "We, the youth of South Africa, reject the subservient heritage that has been handed down to us."

(2) The unique but unfinished contributions of today's Women's Liberation Movement.

Although Dunayevskaya had been writing on Women's Liberation long before the 1960s Movement, when the new Movement arose she deepened her concepts -- because when an idea whose time has come becomes a Movement, both life and philosophy reach a new stage. The book's Chapter 1 is her talk in 1969 when she created the category of "The Women's Liberation Movement as Reason and as Revolutionary Force." Throughout the 1970s and '80s, in all her writings,

she develops the revolutionary Reason of Women's Liberation -- its critique of the sexism within the Left, its challenge to every existing state power, its search for non-elitist forms of revolutionary organization and demand for a society of new relationships.

Nonetheless, precisely because Dunayevskaya sees the revolutionary vision not as something external to but inherent in Women's Liberation -- for there is nothing more revolutionary than the demand for totally new human relationships -- her concept is that the impasse the Movement has currently reached cannot be transcended without a reconnection with and development of that revolutionary dimension. As she writes in a letter in January 1991, as she is completing her book on Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution:

"The more I think of the disregard of Luxemburg by the whole movement, including Socialist Feminists, the more I realize that, once you leave out revolution as the only way to uproot the old society, you are not only reducing Women's Liberation to 'a new sensibility,' but leaving the whole of humanity right within the capitalist framework." (p. 250)

(3) The needed unity of philosophy and reality, philosophy and revolution, philosophy and organization, as the "missing link" in the freedom movements and revolutions of our age.

This dimension runs throughout the book, but is most explicit in the final part IV, where Dunayevskaya discusses the method, the process of her thought, her philosophy of Marxist-Humanism, a recreation of Marx's Marxism on the ground of our own age.

In the opening chapter of Part IV, Dunayevskaya comments, in a radio interview, on the question of family forms and love relationships "after the revolution." She relates this to the concept of Marx's philosophy of "revolution in permanence": "I don't think there is a way we can know the answers beforehand. We are so backward on the whole question that we will have to go through a lot of stages of actual experimentation, with people having the right to choose...The

point is the recognition of what Marx meant by revolution in permanence, that it has to continue afterwards, that it encompasses the criticism that's necessary, the self-criticism that's necessary, and the fact that you have to be very conscious that until we end the division between mental and manual labor -- and every single society has been characterized by that, and it was even in primitive communism -- we will not really have a new man, a new woman, a new child, a new society..." (p. 181)

In presenting Marx's Marxism as a philosophy of "revolution in permanence," Dunayevskaya both critiques "all post-Marx Marxists, beginning with Engles," and focuses on Marx's concept of human development as an "absolute movement of becoming." She traces the development of Marx's thought, beginning from his 1844 Humanist essays, in which he singled out the Man/Woman relationship as the most revealing of all relationships, whose transformation is necessary to the uprooting of dehumanized, class society.

She concentrates, however, on the last decade of Marx's life, which she calls "a trail to the 1980s" because Marx's concerns in the 1880s speak to the needs of our age -- though it remains to our age to blaze that trail, as only we can. She singles out the following:

(1) The greatest revolution in Marx's lifetime, the Paris Commune of 1871, was defeated in a military bloodbath after just a few short weeks of existence. In his The Civil War in France, Marx captured in thought, the highpoints of that first workers' state in history -- a non-state, the Paris Commune -- in such a manner that its brief revolutionary life and practice of new human relationships could serve as a beacon to future generations. That holds true to today, including for the dimension of Women as Reason, the magnificent women Communards whose lives and activity Dunayevskaya comments on in several essays earlier in the book.



Raya Dunayevskaya with Natalia Trotsky, 1938.

(2) One of the questions raised by today's Women's Liberationists is the need for new, non-elitist forms of revolutionary organization. Indeed that question has arisen in many places in our time, from the Portuguese Revolution of 1974-75, which raised the concept of "aPartidarismo" (non-partyism) against the "vanguard party to lead," to Poland's Solidarnosc, from Latin America's unfinished revolutions to the UN International Women's Year/Decade conferences -- all of which are taken up in the book's first three Parts.

It was in his 1875 Critique of the Gotha Program that Marx, in a deeply philosophic way, had raised not only the question of form of organization but its relationship to the philosophy of revolution. Dunayevskaya writes:

"The whole question of organization as non-elitist and demanding the practice of new relations between men and women was not connected by the Women's Liberationists to Marx's philosophy of 'revolution in permanence' as ground for organization. Nevertheless, for the male Left to see the woman's demand for new organizational relations as...only a desire for being 'anarchistic' or for talking of 'personal' rather than political matters, rather than seeing in it the question of new beginnings, exposes more than the pragmatism of our age. It discloses not only the male chauvinism inherent in the Left but their insensitivity to the key question of Marx's concept of the dialectics of revolution itself -- which Marx made inseparable from his concept of the principles of organization..." (p.6)

(3) The dimensions of the Third World and Women's Liberation, which have come so alive in our day, were what Marx was digging into in his last decade as he looked at humanity's "absolute movement of becoming" on a global scale. "Marx's multi-linear view of pathways to human freedom stands in sharp contrast to Engels' unilinear, stagified

concepts of Women's Liberation and human development in his Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State (which many feminists and socialists still consider as "Marx's" work on Women's Liberation).

In his Ethnological Notebooks (just published in 1972), Marx singled out the fact that women in "primitive communism" had higher status than women in advanced capitalist societies, and yet he recognized the contradictions in primitive communism also, that the divisions between mental and manual labor were already appearing there, and that the men had a greater say than the women in the final decisions of war and peace. Marx's point was that there are dualities in every traditional culture, revolutionary dimensions as well as reactionary elements.

This is a problematic that Third World revolutionaries, especially feminists, are grappling with persistently today; it appears concretely in many of the book's earlier chapters. Marx concluded that it is in the context of social revolution that the revolutionary dimension can be deepened; and that revolution could happen first in the technologically underdeveloped world if that in turn was related to world revolution, and to all forces of revolution; and to a philosophy of "revolution in permanence."

One of the most intriguing chapters to me in Part IV is "Selected Letters on the Process of Writing Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution," in which Dunayevskaya shares with us her letters to colleagues and movement activists, 1978-81, as she is working out her third major book, on Luxemburg, feminism and Marx. It is in these letters that we become witness to Dunayevskaya's singling out the category of Marx's "revolution in permanence" -- a concept that was in Marx's writings, but not in the full explicitness with which Dunayevskaya recreates it, compelled by its urgency for our age. We see how the Iranian Revolution, the Iranian

women, Khomeini's swift victory in counter-revolution, was part of the objective world context for Dunayevskaya's development of "revolution in permanence." (It is in one of these letters that she cites the solidarity message to the Iranian feminists that I quoted at the beginning of this review.)

Concretizing the philosophy of "revolution in permanence" is what Dunayevskaya calls "the absolute challenge to our age." It is not a question of utopianism, but of singling out the highpoints of humanity's revolutionary development as new beginnings for today, and recognizing that any truncating of the vision of social revolution will only serve as a barrier to the release and development of spontaneity, of creativity, of self-movement, as has happened in all too many freedom movements and social revolutions of our time.

In the book's final chapter Dunayevskaya concludes that "No other generation could have had the problematic of our age or solve our problems. Only five human beings can recreate the revolutionary dialectic forever anew. It is our generation that has suffered through so many transformations into opposite and new tyrannies even after the old was overthrown and power won. It is to our generation that what happens 'the day after' became so urgent..." (p. 270)

As a revolutionary philosopher, Dunayevskaya's preoccupation is with how the idea of Freedom becomes real. This book shows the concreteness and reach of her vision, as she challenges feminists to not delegate to "others" the responsibilities facing all revolutionaries: the working out of the relationship between the movement from practice and the movement from theory, between spontaneity and organization, philosophy and revolution, the relationship between workers and intellectuals, between the sexes, the races, the historic ages. This book calls on us to think and to act, to become philosopher-activists and thus part of that "history-in-the-making" these essays so vividly show.

michelle landau