

REVIEW ESSAY: WOMAN AS REVOLUTIONARY REASON
ROSA LUXEMBURG, WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND MARX'S
PHILOSOPHY OF REVOLUTION BY RAYA DUNAYEVSKAYA*

MICHELLE LANDAU

P.O. Box 29194, Los Angeles, CA 90029, U.S.A.

Since the beginnings of the current Women's Liberation Movement, one central trend of development within feminist theory has focused on an encounter with Marxism. The nature of this encounter has ranged widely: from Juliet Mitchell's 1966 essay 'Women: The Longest Revolution,' which sought to extend the Marxist framework via Althusserian structuralism; through Shulamith Firestone's 1970 rejection of Marxism but adoption of 'Marxian' terminology to pose the question of *The Dialectic of Sex*; through the ongoing debate, with many participants extending throughout the 1970s, on the relationship between women's domestic labor and capitalism;¹ to the recent anthologies that discuss *Capitalist Patriarchy* (Eisenstein, 1978), *Feminism and Materialism* (Kuhn and Wolpe, 1978), *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (Sargent, 1981).

And yet, despite the diversity of these varied, continuous critiques and original developments, virtually all base their critique of Marxism on an 'orthodox' interpretation which defines Marxism as 'materialism' (the terms are often used interchangeably), an economic determinist analysis of 'modes of production' and the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The correlate of this is the contention that a Marxist perspective on revolution is insufficient for women's liberation. For example, Heidi Hartmann writes: 'The political implications of this . . . marxist approach are clear. Women's liberation requires first, that women become wage workers, like men, and second, that they join with men in the revolutionary struggle against capitalism . . . [But] since capital and private property do not cause the oppression of women as women, their end alone will

not result in the end of women's oppression.'²

Few feminist theorists acknowledge the existence of contending currents within Marxist thought, specifically on this definition of Marxism as a materialist determinism. Further, many make unhesitating reference to Russia and/or China as 'socialist' societies, thus participating in writing out of existence Russian, East European, and Chinese dissidents, women and men, who have challenged the 'socialist' character of their states, as well as Western Marxists who have developed an analysis of state property ownership as not 'socialism,' but state-capitalism.³ These are hardly incidental questions within a discussion of the relationship of feminism, socialism, and revolution.

What these views share in common is an acceptance of the traditional—male—interpretation of Marxism. As against this, isn't it time for feminists to re-examine for ourselves the Marxism of Marx,⁴ with the eyes of today's Women's Liberation Movement? It is today's oppressive reality that compels feminists to dig into understanding the system of capitalism, and to examine the intersections of class and race and sex oppressions—and liberation visions. We have not as yet been able to actualize feminism as a unifying freedom force for women across class and race lines, as we so hoped a decade ago. The discussions of racism within the

² Sargent (1981: 5). This is fairly representative of the view adopted.

³ This holds for those feminist theorists already cited; a more recent example is 'Feminism, Marxism, method and the State: An agenda for theory' by Catherine A. MacKinnon (*Signs*, Spring 1982). This article appeared a year and a half after the mass Solidarnosc movement profoundly challenged the 'socialist' character of the Polish state; see Urszula Wislanka (1982). Tatyana Mamonova, the Russian feminist exiled from her land for founding the independent feminist journal *Women and Russia*, has likewise written of Russia as a state-capitalist society.

⁴ It is fairly common amongst the feminist writers mentioned to discuss Marxism, but quote or cite mainly Engels, and other post-Marx Marxists.

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¹ For extensive references on the domestic labor debate, see pp. 34-35 (footnotes) of Heidi Hartmann's essay, 'The unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism' in Lydia Sargent (1981).

Women's Liberation Movement are as painful and insistent now as they were in 1970, with women of color demanding that their subjectivity be seriously listened to and addressed by white feminists.⁵ At the same time, the continuing economic crisis is sending millions more women and their children to join their sisters in lives of bare subsistence, and the questions these women are raising likewise demand to be addressed by feminist revolutionaries.

It is in this light that a new work by the Marxist-Humanist feminist philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, is a welcome, serious contribution. Her critique of today's feminist theorists is that all too often the theory of feminism is torn out of the context of theory of social revolution; it is the needed social revolution, inseparable from the feminist vision, that thus integrates this book on Luxemburg, feminism, and Marx.

Dunayevskaya's interpretation of Marx's Marxism emphasizes his philosophic dimension, his rootedness in the Hegelian dialectic of subjectivity—the 'absolute negativity' of the subject's continuous self-movement, self-activity, self-development. In other words, Marx rejected both idealism and 'all hitherto existing materialism,' posing rather a new 'human sensuous . . . revolutionary practical-critical' unity of the two.⁶ His philosophy developed as a critique of both vulgar materialism and Hegel's dehumanized idealism.

In her Introduction, Dunayevskaya formulates her view as follows: 'What Marx developed in his discovery of a new continent of thought is that Mind is free and, when tightly related to the creativity of the masses in motion, shows itself to be self-determined and ready for fusion in freedom. . . . In saving the Hegelian dialectic from what Marx called Hegel's "dehumanization" of the Idea, as if its self-determination were mere thought rather than human beings thinking and acting, Marx dug deep into revolution, permanent revolution. Marx's unyielding concentration [was] on revolution, on revolutionary *praxis*—revolutionary ruthless critique of all that exists . . . the transformation of reality remains

⁵ For one of the many recent discussions, see Smith *et al.* (1982).

⁶ 'The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing (Gegenstand), reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object (Objekt) or of contemplation (*Anschauung*), but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in contradistinction to materialism, was developed by idealism—but only abstractly. . . . Hence, he does not grasp the significance of "revolutionary," of "practical-critical" activity.' (Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach,' 1845, quoted in Dunayevskaya, 1982: 115).

the warp and woof of the Marxist dialectic.' (pp. x, xi).

Dunayevskaya's presentation on Marx—which she calls a challenge to 'all post-Marx Marxists, beginning with Engels'—centers on Marx's view of 'history and its process' in relationship to 'the ever-developing Subject—self-developing men and women.' (p. 180). She presents Marxism as a philosophy of human activity and liberation, grounded always in movements for freedom, in life. Marx turned to the real world with the eyes of an Hegelian dialectician, and it was on the basis of the proletarian self-activity in the 1840s that he first formulated his philosophy of freedom. What Dunayevskaya traces in Part III of the book, 'Karl Marx—From Critic of Hegel to Author of *Capital* and Theorist of "Revolution in Permanence,"' is Marx's attentiveness to each new subject of revolution, whether the proletariat, the Black dimension in America, women, the peasantry, or what we now call the Third World.⁷

Indeed, it was the 1972 transcription of Marx's final writings, his 1881-82 *Ethnological Notebooks*, which was one of the events prompting her book, Dunayevskaya tells us in the Introduction. These *Ethnological Notebooks* opened up a new view of Marxism as a totality, showing that Marx, at the end of his life, in studying the new science of anthropology, was returning to the question of the pivotal nature of the Man/Woman relationship that he had first raised in his 1844 Humanist Essays, as well as turning to new questions of what we now call the Third World. The *Ethnological Notebooks* reveal a conception of the needed transformation of human relations that is far more profound than Engels' in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, long considered by post-Marx Marxists as the published expression of these final 'jottings' of Marx; these *Notebooks* show Marx's continual 'revolution in permanence' in thought, his ever-deeper digging into the passions and ideas of human beings for creating a human reality.

It is thus with these eyes that Dunayevskaya has developed the philosophic category central to this book, 'Woman as Reason'. It is her recreation of the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic of subjectivity out of the development, in life, of Women's Liberation moving in our time, finally and forever, from an idea whose time has come to a global, mass movement. It

⁷ Zillah Eisenstein is one feminist theorist who does discuss the philosophic dimension of Marx's works, rejecting a vulgar materialist interpretation. Yet she considers that Marx perceived 'woman . . . as just another victim, undistinguished from the proletariat in general. . . .' (Eisenstein, 1978: 11) Dunayevskaya's argument is that Marx's philosophy focused neither on the proletariat nor on woman as 'victim,' but rather on both as active subject.

is Dunayevskaya's thesis that, while today's Women's Liberation Movement has uncovered long-hidden facts of women's history, these facts have either centered on women as victims, or, where they have involved women's ideas and movements for freedom, have been insufficiently integrated into feminist theory and philosophy. This is the meaning of her contention that women have not only been 'hidden from history' but 'hidden from philosophy' as well: revolutionary—including feminist—philosophy is too often formulated in some separate compartment from 'history and its process', in particular the activity of those deepest layers of women who have challenged all forms of oppression in society, and whose movement and thought points to a new vision of human liberation.

It is precisely these movements and these visions that Dunayevskaya singles out in the philosophic category 'Woman as Reason', women's creative subjectivity and freedom aspirations arising from the social reality of their lives, and bursting forth in movements, strikes and outright revolutions. '[T]he root of theory, its true beginning' (p. 82) must be in the impulses and ideas arising 'from below,' if feminist theory is to genuinely break with the elitism of patriarchal, class society. Only such a unity of the 'movement from practice' and the 'movement from theory' can open pathways to new, revolutionary beginnings for the future.

Thus, Part II of the book, on 'The Women's Liberation Movement as Revolutionary Force and Reason,' opens with a chapter titled 'An Overview by way of Introduction; the Black Dimension,' where Black women's ideas against racism, sexism, and class oppression are shown both historically and today. The chapter begins with an 1831 quote from an almost forgotten Black woman, Maria Stewart, who was the first American-born woman, white or Black, to speak publicly. Maria Stewart called on 'ye daughters of Africa' to 'awake! awake! arise! . . . How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles? . . . How long shall a mean set of men flatter us with their smiles, and enrich themselves with our hard earnings: their wives' fingers sparkling with rings and they themselves laughing at our folly?' (p. 79).

Dunayevskaya's discussion of Sojourner Truth likewise focuses not only on her courage and eloquence, but on the philosophy of freedom she expressed and acted upon, whether in challenge to white women or Black men. Her very name itself 'tells us,' Dunayevskaya writes, 'more than just the fact that she had broken with male domination.' (p. 82). When the feminists split, following the Civil War, from those abolitionists who refused to collaborate in the fight for women's suffrage on the ground that this was 'the Negro hour' (meaning Black men), Sojourner Truth hit out at Frederick

Douglass, calling him 'short-minded.' . . . it became clear that "short-minded" was more than an epithet. Rather, it was a new language—the language of thought—against those who would put any limitations to freedom.' (p. 82).⁸

In other words, not only had Sojourner Truth broken with male domination, but she was posing the necessity to break with any 'mind-forged manacles,'⁹ to have so total a view of freedom as to brook no interference to humanity's revolutionary self-development.

When we come to our own age, we again see Black women as Reason, again central to the thought and courage of the freedom passions that birthed an independent Women's Liberation Movement. Black women were among the earliest leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, a fact generally treated, Dunayevskaya points out—if at all—as 'accidental.' But not only did women like Gloria Richardson, the recognized leader of the movement in Cambridge, Maryland, refuse to 'step back' when so told by the male SNCC leadership, the truth is also that it was in SNCC itself that the first charges of sexism within a Left organization were raised. Moreover, 'scores of other Black women rose to lead further struggles and to demonstrate that women's liberation included not only those groups who called themselves that, but Welfare Rights mothers and nurses aides marching in Charleston, South Carolina, for better conditions, and cleaning women in New York in their sixties and seventies who complained that men were being paid more and, when asked what they thought about Women's Liberation, replied, "We are women's liberationists."' (p. 103).

Or take Africa, where not only in our day have Black women been organizing for liberation, but in 1929 tens of thousands of Igbo women engaged in what became known as 'The Women's War'. Utilizing the traditional Igbo women's mass expression of protest known as 'sitting on a man,'¹⁰ this time the Igbo women protested against both British imperialism, and their own African chiefs who were colluding with British imperialism's plans to tax the market women.

"Women's War," Dunayevskaya reminds us, 'is not as unusual a phenomenon as patriarchal histories would have us think.' (p. 86). Whether it is

⁸ For the opposite perspective on the significance of Sojourner Truth's break with Frederick Douglass, see Angela Davis (1981).

⁹ This beautiful phrase comes from the English poet William Blake.

¹⁰ 'Sitting on a man' involved masses of women going to the offending man's hut, pounding on his walls night and day while singing scurrilous songs detailing the women's grievances, until he offered apology and redress.

the Igbo Women's War; or the 1868 revolt in Poland referred to as a 'Women's War'; or the Iroquois women that Marx wrote about in his *Ethnological Notebooks* 'knocking off the horns' of a chief to send him back to the ranks; or the world historic March 1917 Russian Revolution that overthrew the centuries-old Tsarist regime, initiated by women textile workers on International Women's Day; what Dunayevskaya emphasizes in her presentation is that women, far from only endlessly suffering under the oppressive weight of patriarchy, have, in all times and all places, moved to create new stages of freedom.

Dunayevskaya has elsewhere¹¹ discussed her formulation that Marx broke with the very concept of theory as a debate between theoreticians, to develop instead a concept of theory based on the freedom activity of masses of people, in life; it is this concept of theory she here recreates, for the Women's Liberation Movement, in her development and discussion of 'Woman as Reason.' The distinctiveness of this philosophic contribution is seen when one considers other tendencies of feminist thought, which reveal a different view towards the origin of theory and its relationship to historical subjectivity.

Certainly, all tendencies of feminist theory begin with the insistence on our own subjectivity; the Women's Liberation Movement arose with our refusal to be either objects or the projections of another's consciousness. But so much has feminist theory been separated from seeing masses of women as subjects of history—often with the view, for example, that all previous revolutions have been 'male defined'—that the activity of live, historical women gets 'lost' once theory is developed.

This is perhaps truest of some radical feminists, who develop variations on themes of biologism¹² or Existentialism.¹³ Histories—or herstories—are

¹¹ See her *Marxism and Freedom*, 1958, Chapter V, 'The Impact of the Civil War in the United States on the Structure of Capital.'

¹² Susan Griffin (1978), while rejecting the explicit biologism of those who assert a 'natural' female superiority, likewise nonetheless abstracts from the activity of live women as they have entered/are entering history-in-the-making.

¹³ Compare the following passages: 'Women do not contest the human situation, because they have hardly begun to assume it. . . . The restrictions that education and custom impose on women now limit her grasp on the universe; when the struggle to find one's place in this world is too arduous, there can be no question of getting away from it.' (de Beauvoir, 1949. See the Bantam edition, 1961: 669, 670); 'So long as Man is equal to human but Woman is non-Man (and therefore nonhuman) how could we possibly invent anything so comparatively simple as mere freedom?

written with the focus not on woman as subject, but woman as object, as victim; the only subjectivity left to open a pathway forward is that of the author herself, and her 'followers.'¹⁴ But how is this any fundamental break with patriarchal thinking that considers women backward?

Proclaiming 'Woman as Reason' is not a matter of 'skipping over' the present and historical pain and terror and death meted out to women, but a philosophic recognition that a view of objectivity alone, *sans* subjectivity, 'skips over' the openings to self-movement. Or, as Dunayevskaya comments (and this comment comes in another context, in her discussion in Part III of the 'fetishism of commodities' in Marx's *Capital*): '. . . to get to the totality we cannot leave it at objectivity. The objective may outweigh the subjective, but, unless we see the unity of the two and grapple with the truth of both, we will never be free. And freedom is what all the striving is about.' (p. 144).

Socialist-feminist theory as well, while encompassing a historical view, and not focusing on 'woman as victim,' nevertheless too often separates the history of women's subjectivity from theory. Analyses of 'capitalist patriarchy' are debated, reworked, footnoted, with little or no reference to movements of working class women, their ideas and actions against this capitalist patriarchy. 'Revolution' becomes an abstract concept: the anthology *Women and Revolution* (Sargent, 1981) contains little discussion of actual revolutions, the extent of women's participation and feminist content within them, the dialectic of the revolution's development and of the counter-revolution.

Sheila Rowbotham is one socialist-feminist who did delve seriously into the intersection of socialist and feminist dimensions in revolutionary periods, in her *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (1972). Yet when she comes to write theory for 'today'—her recent essay in *Beyond the Fragments* (1979), summing up the decade of the 1970s—the activity of women in revolutions is nowhere mentioned. This despite the fact that the revolutionary feminist activity of working-class women in the 1974 Portuguese Revolution impinged most directly on the question Rowbotham addresses, that of form of revolutionary organization.

Such abstraction of theory from 'history and its process' can only create ground for presenting 'freedom' as some utopian ideal, without path to its realization. But freedom is no abstract or utopian

As ultimate a task as imagining freedom would require, after all, every cell of sentient energy available to all of us—yet more than half the species has not been permitted to approach the task.' (Morgan, 1982: 10).

¹⁴ Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), is a prime example of this genre.

concept; it is the most live and real passion of our beings. Our passion has birthed, in our age, a global Women's Liberation Movement. Revolution likewise is no abstraction, but the only way to uproot this sexist society and create one based on new human relationships. That is why *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* shows revolution as the concrete historical event of masses in motion uprooting the old and creating the new.

We are not yet there. The revolutions of our age have soured and aborted and been transformed into their opposites. But in each revolution, Dunayevskaya shows, *Woman as Reason* has been present: whether in Iran, 1906, where the women for the first time, anywhere in the world, created an independent women's *anjuman*, or soviet—or in Iran, 1979, where the women revolutionaries who had fought the Shah were the first to march against Khomeini; whether in Russia, 1917, or in Germany, 1919—or in Portugal, 1974, where not only were masses of women active in the land seizures and factory takeovers, demanding as well, from their husbands, new relations at home, but both the Marxist leader Isabel do Carmo and the feminist Maria Barreno arose to pose new questions of revolutionary organization and new human relations.

Dunayevskaya is not proposing a thesis of women as universally the vanguard of revolution, though there are indeed historical moments when masses of women have been vanguard—whether in March 1917 in Russia, or March 1979 in Iran. Whether it is women, or workers, or a national minority, or youth, who will be the vanguard in a revolution is a concrete question of development in each particular country, for each historic period. What Dunayevskaya does show is that women's aspirations, demands, and activities for freedom always deepen the content of any movement or revolution, and that the success of counter-revolutions should not so blind us as to dismiss women's revolutionary activity as 'male defined.'

The fact that, far too often, Women's Liberation has been separated from revolution, by male revolutionaries—put off, or put down, or put aside—is no excuse for our making that same separation today. This is the reason for the book's focus on Rosa Luxemburg, who speaks to us with the language of passionate commitment to revolutionary transformation. By disregarding Luxemburg, because she supposedly had nothing to say on the 'Woman Question,' today's feminists are cutting themselves off from a historic link—both with Luxemburg as individual woman revolutionary thinker and activist, and with the mass women's movement of Luxemburg's day, which she participated in and which was at the forefront of anti-war struggle both before and after 1914.

It is not that Dunayevskaya is uncritical of

Luxemburg. In fact she maintains that it was precisely Luxemburg's reduction of Marxism to 'a theory of class struggle', that narrowed her view. Luxemburg never articulated theoretically the independent dimensions of both Women's Liberation and national liberation struggles, though she herself was a woman and a Pole. But it was Luxemburg who voiced the greatest appreciation for the spontaneity and creativity of mass activity, as she herself participated in the 1905 revolution—'Revolutions,' she wrote, 'cannot be schoolmastered'—and it was Luxemburg who raised the problematic that haunts our own age, the question of socialist democracy after the revolution.

With the eyes of today's Women's Liberation Movement, Dunayevskaya not only uncovers Luxemburg's unexplored feminist dimension, but presents the fullness of her boundless, multidimensional joy. 'Being human,' Luxemburg wrote from prison in the midst of World War I, 'means joyfully throwing your whole life "on the scales of destiny" when need be, but all the while rejoicing in every sunny day and every beautiful cloud.' Dunayevskaya comments: 'It is this need to throw one's whole life on the scales of destiny; it's this passion for revolution; it's the urgency to get out of prison confinement and open entirely new vistas; in a word, it's the need for what Luxemburg called "staying human," that characterized the whole of her vision for a new society. It put the stamp on all she did and ever hoped to make real.' (p. 83).

It is just such a reaching for a new future that characterizes feminist philosophy today. And it is just such a reaching for a transformed tomorrow that emerges from the hunger and aspirations of women all over this planet, women as Reason.* As a contribution to the path towards uniting feminist philosophy and revolution, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* merits serious reading and discussion.

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*Humanities Press has announced International Women's Day 1985 as the publication date for a new book by Raya Dunayevskaya, tentatively titled *What is New in Women's Liberation as Movement and as Philosophy?*

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