

CONFERENCE ON WOMEN'S LIBERATION HELD IN DETROIT, MICHIGAN
FEBRUARY 21, 1971 — A BRIEF SUMMARY

Anne welcomed the friends attending this Conference with Raya Dunayevskaya, who had accepted the invitation to come to help her in the writing of the final chapter of her new book, Philosophy and Revolution, which will deal with "New Passions and New Forces". Those who had come included both students and workers, both black and white, 20 women and 5 men, more non-members than members of News & Letters.

Raya began her presentation by pointing out that the core of the dialectic as a movement is the number two, and then went into some of the dangers in this number two: We live in an age when even those opposites that are not antagonistic contradictions such as capital and labor are, nevertheless reveal the struggle of opposites: men and woman; workers and intellectuals; theory and practice; spontaneity and organization; philosophy and revolution. This duality in reality is the knot to be unravelled and we therefore might as well make it the focal point of this discussion as well.

Everything can be divided today into: I- the Idea as such, and II - the Idea whose time has come. For the Idea as such there are two dates in history to take up: 1844 when Marx wrote his famous Economic and Philosophic Essays, and 1947 when these essays were translated into English by Raya Dunayevskaya. For the Idea whose time has come we will have to take up 1965 when it was the "new", and 1971 when we must begin to consider our perspectives.

Marx called his philosophy a "new humanism". In those 1844 Essays he lashed out against both capitalism and vulgar communism. In the Essay on "Private Property and Communism" he said that the most fundamental relationship of all human relationships is that of man to woman. In 1947 when Raya translated the Essays, however, what she stressed was Marx's anti-capitalism and anti-vulgar-communism, as she was exposing the true state-capitalist nature of Russia which called itself "communist". She did take up the man/woman aspects of the

-2-

Essays twice. Once was in a discussion in 1947 with a professor who argued that it was not true that all contradictions are class contradictions. Raya pointed to the Essay on the five senses, where Marx says that "seeing, hearing, smell, taste, feeling, thought, perception, experience, wishing activity, loving" are all human relations to the world — and that it is private property that has made us so stupid that we think an object is ours only when we possess it directly — "eat it, drink it, wear it, live in it, etc. — in short use it." Raya had pointed out the class nature in even such a thing as "taste" by comparing the difference of As for "human nature", there is no human nature except to be free. hunger to a starving child or to a gourmet. / The other time Raya had taken up the man/woman relationships as fundamental was in 1949 when the West Virginia miners were on strike, and only men came to a party that had been arranged. The men were promptly sent home to get their wives, without whom they could never have maintained their strike.

The transition point between "Idea as such" and "Idea whose time has come" is 1955, when News & Letters Committees wrote their Constitution and women were singled out as one of the forces of Revolution. We alone did that, and even reserved a special section of our paper for Women, just as we had for Black voices. But because the women's movement had not yet appeared it nevertheless remained "Idea as such."

But the 1960's is a totally new stage. It is true that we have always pointed out the inter-relationship of the Abolitionist Movement and the Women's Movement. It is not denigrating that tremendous page in history to stress the "new" that has now appeared, and is different from all the past. There have been women's struggles throughout history, but the simple truth is that none before ever did what the new women are doing today. These new women had many things in their favor from the start:

1. They were young, and I am not stressing that as a "generational aspect", but to emphasize that it eliminated from the start any nonsense that they were having troubles with males because they "couldn't get one."
2. They were from the Left, so they didn't have to be self-conscious about any charges that they weren't concerned with "humanity."
3. The Black dimension was present — that is, Black women

4356

-3-

joined in the charges against male-chauvinism -- so they didn't have to worry about charges they were anti-Black if they charged Black males with male-chauvinism, too.

4. They had no illusions about being a "majority", even though there are more women in the population than men, because far from a majority of all these women shared their views. The women represent different classes, with very different outlooks on many of the most basic goals.

But despite all these things in their favor, the Women's Liberation Movement has found the need for philosophy. The division in SDS was precisely on philosophic questions. Their disintegration was the result of their total disregard for philosophy. It has brought the WL Movement to an impasse, too. But the movement is so objectively valid that no matter what, it will keep rising up, over and over again. The most important point of the whole Movement is that the women are objecting to being object, instead of Subject, to use the Hegelian term. They are seeking to become whole human beings.

There is a division of Theory into two stages. (If you want to read it for yourselves it is discussed by Hegel in the Phenomenology on pages 77 and 80.) He says that everything depends on grasping Truth not as Substance, but as Subject as well. The initial stage has to be alone, because otherwise the new will not come out. This is why Lenin kept talking about the shyness of workers; and why it was important for Blacks not always to have some white standing over their shoulders. This independence is, however, not for separation, but to be able to develop to another stage. Then there must be a return to philosophy to develop positions in your own organization. This self-consciousness and "taking back our heads" is being done to free everyone, not to make the same mistakes as men.

No one knows when the revolution will occur, it is spontaneous. nobody knows what will spark it. That is not the question. The question we are discussing is that you have to have something new to say, if you are serious about developing a theory. Raya took the article by Barbara B. in our pamphlet, Notes on Women's Liberation: We Speak in Many Voices, as an example of what happens when you are not grounded in philosophy.

4357

-4-

The article was so anxious to establish that Marx was wrong that it claims that Engels' theory was what Marx drew on for his theory of Historical Materialism. That is totally wrong factually, of course, which would be simple to prove even chronologically. But the most important error is not the factual one, but the methodology involved. Marx's historical materialism demonstrated that exploitation of labor by capital is rooted not only in the division between mental and manual labor, but in the relationship of man to women. And Marx showed that all history was movement. History is not "past". It is present, too. All history is the history of class struggles. But you have to understand that part of the oppression is what the rulers do to rob you of your thought, as well as the fruits of your labor. They don't want you to think — just to work. But the great truth is that no matter how much they may be oppressed, men and women do think, and they think their own thoughts. In fact, the more alienated you are, the greater you are, because the greater is your quest for universality.

Let's take two theoretical works on women to examine what they do and what they don't do. One is Kate Millett's Sexual Politics, and the other is Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex. What is Millett's failure? Hers is an excellent study, but because she is limiting her vision to only the woman aspect, she winds up saying that we had revolutionary activity up until women got the vote and then, after 1920, it was all counter-revolution. That is a fantastic thing to say, when we have lived through the Spanish Revolution, the African Revolutions, revolutions all over the world. Moreover, she fails to see "transformation into opposite." Thus, she criticises Norman Mailer very correctly for many things, but fails to see that he was revolutionary at the end of World War II. His Naked and the Dead was one of the greatest works to come out of that entire period. Incidentally, Millett likes Engels; she appreciates him as a man who was looking at the exploitation of women and trying to do something about it, trying to analyze it, speaking up to expose it. But she is not a philosopher, and she thus misses the mark as a result. In short, Millett wrote a great book, but it needs some criticism — and it is the sort of critique that we could do, not with any long thesis, but just a few short paragraphs making a few of these important points.

4358

Now take De Beauvoir. She doesn't like Engels, by the way. And she does mention Marx. However, she, too, goes nowhere. We could definitely have something to say on her works. Again, not a long thesis — a couple of paragraphs can say a great deal.

Finally, let's come to Philosophy and Revolution, my book-in-progress, which you are here to help me finish. It has three major Parts. Part I takes up Hegel, Marx and Lenin. One of the most important parts for us here is the section that deals with how Marx concretized Hegel and at the same time broke with the whole concept of what is theory. This is where history as process comes in. Part II deals with Alternatives: Trotsky, Mao, and Sartre. And Part III is "New Passions and Forces" which deals with the Blacks, youth and women. We have been able to show why the Black dimension and why the youth are these new passions and new forces, because, in fact, the Blacks throughout American history and specifically since the Montgomery Bus Boycott, as well as the Blacks in Africa, had raised questions of deep philosophic import, whether it was Robert Moses on education or Fanon on the whole African revolution. The same reason — that is, concrete questions that were raised — enabled us to show this on the part of the Youth, as well, whether it was Savio on alienation, or the French Revolt in May, 1968, where the new forms of student-workers committees were established. In the case of the Women, we have not succeeded in hearing quite that many new voices. What we do know is that self-development means that you will gain a new dimension in yourselves, will feel a totality in the new person you are becoming, as you give expression to what you are feeling and thinking. The proof of Marxist-Humanism will be in your own self-development.

* * *

The floor was opened for discussion to women only for this first session. Debbie asked for the distinction between philosophy and theory, and Raya explained that a new philosophy appears only very rarely in history. Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, divided all modern philosophy into only three: Descartes; Kant and Hegel; and Marx. While Raya disagreed with Sartre on his divisions, the idea of the rarity is correct.

-6-

The important point is that we are all living in the period of Marx's philosophy. He captured a whole age, and while his philosophy was based on the study of years and years of human activity, past and present, it contains the germs for the future. Theory means taking a part of the philosophy and developing it for your particular period. There are divisions in theory. You can anticipate, but only "in general", not the particular. The important period is when you are able to single out the new category, for your age. Raya spoke of the development of the state-capitalism theory which was analyzed in 1941, but for which the humanist dimension was not re-established until 1947. Every new stage of cognition comes only when a new stage of objectivity has been reached. Thus theory means recapturing the movement that was present in the philosophy, but not real yet. What it means is that when a new force arises, you can catch it if you are rooted in the philosophy.

Leonida, a 10 year old who was present, asked the last question in this first session by posing: What kind of freedom does Women's Liberation want?

* * *

The afternoon session was chaired by the participant from Los Angeles. Raya opened the session, which was to take up the organizational questions flowing from the theoretical groundwork, by posing some of the concrete tasks of the N&L-Women's Liberation Committee specifically. Part of the function of the committee was seen as:

- 1- Working with working class women in their struggles, which encompassed fights with both management and the labor bureaucracy.
- 2- Listening to the voices from below, which is another way of saying that "News & Letters is a weapon in the class struggle." The pages of N&L, and of our pamphlets are the open forums which we invite the women to use for these struggles, just as we have for the struggles of Blacks, workers, and youth.
- 3- Working out a relationship with others, that is, the so-called "unorganizational and apolitical" women — and our position with other tendencies.

-7-

When we speak of "projecting our philosophy", that is, Marxist-Humanism, what it means is: 1- how we work with individuals to demonstrate self-development of ourselves and of them; 2- how we guarantee a unity of theory and practice -- one thing we might do is have a steady column for book reviews on each WL page in N&L; another is a section of Readers' Views right on that page in the paper, rather than in the RV section itself; 3- how the minutes will reflect what the committee is actually achieving. One way to have serious minutes is to have serious meetings.

In the discussion Janice asked first for a definition of class, a broader definition that could encompass women; and it was explained that when Marx spoke of workers vs. capitalists, he didn't separate alienation from class, and he was speaking of all oppressed people. Barbara and Leslie spoke of the work on their campus, Leslie pointing out that there is an ingrowth that results in looking on demands for equal pay for equal work as "reformist". She felt that one of the greatest things about N&L is its concern with working people, and that this link with workers is what makes N&L so important to the movement. Mary was asked to tell the conference what is happening in New York, and she reported on the tremendous feeling that everyone had after the March last August, and the abortion victory -- but by now there is the recognition that nothing really came out of all the victories. The March was great because it wasn't one group that participated, but all. Yet afterwards, each went back to her own group. And the truth is that nobody seems too interested in the working women.

Debbie spoke of the situation in the movement in L.A., which at one time was also exciting, but which disintegrated into faction fights. There is a feeling, she said, that the only relation to the masses is to lead them when something happens. And since there are no mass actions to "lead" right now, they are not doing anything. Susie was concerned that self-development sometimes seems to be taken to mean that you go off and "self-develop" in a corner all by yourself; and Anne spoke of the importance of seeing self-development in relation to an historical idea, contrasting that concept to the "philosophic conference" she had attended in Canada, where the "philosophers" seemed to be concerned only with their own Ego.

4361

Ann spoke of the difficulty of incorporating theory and practice in everything we do, which seems to be the most important thing to be able to do; and Estelle felt that the biggest problem of the N&L-WL Committee is how to relate to the outside, when some of the women we meet are skeptical of Marxist-Humanism and we have not found out how to show them what Marxist-Humanism is. Sandra spoke about men being suspicious of WL because the concept of freedom to them is "power", especially power to exploit others. Olga spoke of how difficult it seems to both the old radicals and to the women who stand off from theory, to understand the individuality, and yet universality, of WL; and she said that just looking at the writings of Raya on women, even though Raya has never been a "specialist" on that, shows how, if you have your ears tuned to the forces of revolution, you have the development of a theory.

Esther emphasized the importance of looking at today; and Effie spoke of the importance of people learning the "new" and the fact that women, Black and white, know how men have kept them back, even though they generally do much harder work than men. She felt that women will never go back to the old ways now, just as Black people will never go back. Bonnie spoke of how nobody else is working with working women, while that comes naturally to us; but that is where our work first begins — it is how we relate that to our philosophy, and make it all concrete that we must work out. Marlene was concerned with how to get women together, and with the fact that WL, even though it seemed like a great idea, just isn't going anywhere; and Celeste took up the question of the importance of child-care, which is essential for the working woman, or for any woman who is going to have time to be active outside her home. She was concerned with the fact that this society tends to "individualize" people in the sense of separating them from each other, and keeping them in the home is one way of separating women.

Raya asked each of the men present if he had anything to contribute to the discussion, and each one spoke briefly: Ron asked for further clarification around why the idea of "all women are my sisters" is wrong; Mike contrasted the discussion at the Conference here to the sad state of affairs in the WL Movement as it is reflected in the part that puts out

-9-

the periodicals that N&L receives in the office; Ray felt that getting more working women in the movement was one of the first necessities, and emphasized once more the great importance of the Black dimension.

* * *

In her Summation, Raya said she was going to concentrate on the News & Letters - Women's Liberation Committee, which is a very specific type of committee, and which will demonstrate what we mean about "spontaneity" and "organization", and about the uniqueness of this committee in relation to the new book, and to the special page in N&L.

It sounds wonderful to say "unite all women" -- but it is utopian to say we should (or could) unite all women in a day-care-center issue. What have we decided are the most important elements in the Movement today? Proletarian and Black dimension. Therefore, concentrating on that, though it may sound "narrow", is the only way to really broaden the Movement. Why is it that after all the magnificent demonstrations throughout the past year, we hear complaints that no group is doing anything? Because of the class differences in the Movement. There is "tokenism" of all kinds, on all kinds of questions -- and some women are going to be allowed to break into new fields and get some good jobs -- because the rulers are afraid of the real movement, from below.

What we are doing, because our philosophy is a total one, is listening to these voices from below, and working out a theory for the Movement based on that. What we have to do is bring out the new dimensions of women as revolutionary force. The greatest strength of the movement is its spontaneity. This is the time when the objective time and the subjective situation have exploded. The self-development we are talking about is not the careerist woman, but the woman who thought she didn't know how to speak. Nobody else has a forum like News & Letters where all are invited to write and speak -- via the tape machine, if necessary. Ever since we began News & Letters, over 15 years ago, the tape machine has been the "magic box" that recorded what workers, Blacks, and women were feeling and thinking, and permitted us to transcribe those ideas and put them in the

-10-

paper for others to share.

Correspondence has always been considered of primary importance to us, as well. Correspondence with others, to share our ideas, and elicit theirs. In fact, the history of News & Letters goes all the way back to the American Revolution on this question of correspondence -- because it was during the American Revolution that Committees of Correspondence became one of the most important developments of the revolution. And that is exactly where our conception of our organization as a new form of "Committees of Correspondence" came from.

We cannot forget, either, that it is no accident that ours is the only Left political organization whose theoretical founder is a woman.

As for the immediate perspectives of the N&L-WL Committee, it may be that we have to find some way to guarantee that each meeting combines both theory and practice. In the beginning, we may have to divide the meeting mechanically -- so much time for this, and so much time for the other. You take up a concrete problem, like the ARA working women's case, and then you compel yourself to take up some aspect of theory. You will soon discover why correspondence is the most important activity of all, as you discover that putting down your ideas in black and white, rather than expressing them orally, brings out some surprising things. And it forces you to clarify your thoughts.

The work ahead is not going to be easy. But it will be exciting because it will be breaking totally new ground. It is work that needs to be done, and nobody else is doing it. Don't forget that our magnificent organization did not come to be what it is easily. It took a lot of very hard work -- and it is far from being finished.

* * *

4364