

ROSA LUXEMBURG, WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND MARX'S PHILOSOPHY OF REVOLUTION

(A speech given by Raya Dunayevskaya at the Women's Center, University of California at Berkeley, April 1981. Available on tape at the Women's Center, UC Berkeley. The transcription has not been checked with Ms. Dunayevskaya.)

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Good afternoon. We have a lot of history to cover. I don't know whether the fact that all of history is really contemporary history -- that is, that we view the past with the ideas of today -- will be of any help in trying to present the three parts of my work, Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution as a totality. We need to go both backward and forward -- that is, to have the past, the present, and perhaps a slight view of the future. But what can help in trying to cover this much ground is to have a view of what I consider the center and the key for the entire work -- dialectics of liberation.

Dialectics of liberation has to be considered both as a philosophy and as reality, the actual struggles for liberation. It has to be seen as methodology; as double negation; as goal, what Marx called "a new Humanism"; and as a universal. The universal relates not only to Marx's time but to the concept with which Marx started; the reason Marx called his philosophy "a new Humanism" was in order to stress that he was opposed not only to capitalism as an exploitative society, but to what he called "vulgar communism," the thought that once you abolish private property you have a new society. In place of either the profit motive of capitalism or the state form of property of vulgar communism, Marx was for a new Humanism, the unity of the ideal and the real.

In order to stress exactly what he meant and why he chose that particular name, he let you "forget" about the class struggle -- which he certainly thought was central to any Marxism, to any historical materialism -- and had you instead look at the most fundamental of all relations, that of Man/Woman. Here Marx asks you to consider not an enemy but the most beloved person one could imagine, and see how miserably she is treated. She is second sex, not first; she is subordinate, and so forth. In seeing this relationship Marx wants us to realize that we are living in such an alienating, alienated society, such an absolutely frustrating society which constantly fragments a person, that we should want to uproot it, even if we didn't believe in the class struggle.

With this concept Marx emphasized not just his own time, but what came before. I want to carry that through in a new way and begin not only before our own age, but before Luxemburg's and before Marx's. Let us take up the year 1831. It was the year of the greatest slave revolt in American history. Marx was only thirteen years old so he couldn't possibly have affected it. It was the year of Hegel's death, so he couldn't have affected it. Yet Nat Turner, when he was asked, as he was about to be hanged, whether he didn't conspire in a slave revolt that had occurred in another county, replied by asking why they could not believe that the passion for freedom is so strong and so total that to want to sacrifice your life for that idea would come not only to him, but to many others. He told them there would be many revolts to come whether they hanged him or not. And they hanged him.

In that same year, Maria Stewart, a Black woman, became the first woman, Black or white, to make a public speech in America. If anybody was lower than even the slave it was the woman. I want to read to you her statement in this first speech in Boston in 1831:

O ye daughters of Africa, awake! awake! arise! no longer sleep nor slumber but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties 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?

You have to ask yourself whether it is accidental that a Black man, Nat Turner, led the greatest slave revolt, and a Black woman, in the very same year, made this statement and set a new precedent not just for Black, but for all women.

The same type of coincidence, which I do not consider at all a coincidence, occurred in 1843. A woman by the name of Flora Tristan -- a utopian socialist, a very great woman, active not only in England and in France, but throughout the world -- tried to start what would have been a first international. We did not see the actual First International until Marx organized it some 20 years later. But Flora Tristan had said that unless the workingmen and women started an international society in which their aim would be the abolition of the difference between mental and manual labor, we would not get to a new society. Unfortunately, exhaustion and typhoid took her life the very next year. It was the same year, 1844, that Marx wrote the manuscripts of his now famous Humanist Essays. And it was in those essays that he declared his "new Humanism," stressing the need to uproot society totally -- beginning with the exploitative phase, but moving to establish new human relations. It was the preliminary to the actual revolutions that occurred in 1848. It was the first philosophic statement of what I call a new continent of thought and of revolution. It was this new continent of thought and of revolution which Marx spelled out in the more famous Communist Manifesto. That didn't have to wait until today to be discovered. It was famous the day it was published. And for a very simple reason. It had hardly come off the press when the 1848 Revolutions began.

Early in the modern Women's Liberation Movement, when I would lecture and say that "it is no accident" that 1848, the year of all the Revolutions -- French, Italian, Spanish, and German -- was likewise the year of the first Women's Rights Convention in America, in Seneca Falls, I would be laughed at as utopian for relating the two. "What did the Seneca Falls Convention have in common with the 1848 Revolutions?" I would be asked. I will tell you what they had in common. There was something in the air from the time of the slave revolts and from the time of the Black dimension which began showing the Sojourner Truths and Harriet Tubmans not only as people who were fighting for their own freedom and for an end to slavery, but as women who raised many other important questions, total questions. The white intellectual women, in contrast, were saying: For heaven's sakes, look at what the Blacks are doing, and all we are doing is making sandwiches for the movement. Well we are certainly for making sandwiches to help put down slavery. But shouldn't we ask also for our rights as women?

But it turned out that all the connections were more than "in the air," because what else was happening at the same time, was again connected to woman. Let us consider Margaret Fuller, the one woman who was recognized to be "as good as a man." She was the first woman editor of Dial Press. She was the first woman journalist for the New York Tribune, the same journal Marx wrote for a few years later.

And she was accepted to Brook Farm supposedly on an equal level with the Emersons and the Thoreaus. Hawthorne made her a heroine in Blithedale Romance. But suddenly she felt thoroughly disgusted with her role, with their tokenism, with what was their highest philosophy, pragmatism. So off she went to Italy to become a participant in the 1848 Revolutions, to take a lover (a partisan at that), and to have a child. She was very worried about what her friends and all those great intellectuals at Brook Farm would say. But the truth of the matter is that not only as a revolutionary, not only as a very talented person, not only as a multi-dimensional character, but as a woman, she had become something quite different. Tragically, the ship on which she was returning to America in 1851 with her lover and child was wrecked in sight of the shore, and for years all the great things she did as a revolutionary were hidden. (Her latest biography, The Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller's Life and Writings by Bell Gale Chevigny, has brought them out of hiding.)

Now, 1851 was the year of the second Women's Convention in Worcester, Mass., and the women grieved, wondering who was going to lead the intellectual women now that Margaret Fuller was dead. But something happened at that convention which brings us back again to 1848. The women who were revolutionaries in the 1848 Revolution in France were by 1851 in prison; the revolution had been defeated. In prison, Pauline Roland and Jeanne Deroin heard about the American women's convention, and sent a letter to the assembly, saying how happy they were that the women's struggle for liberation was continuing. And Ernestine Rose got up to identify the American women with the 1848 Revolutions, saying: "After having heard the letter read from our poor incarcerated sisters of France, well might we exclaim, Alas, poor France! where is thy glory? where the glory of the Revolution of 1848?"

I do not know whether we can say that had Margaret Fuller not died we would have had the first Marxist-Humanist woman then, but it is a cinch that all these revolutionary events did coalesce in such a way that you could see revolution in the air. You could see that the dialectics of liberation wasn't just a thought, but an actual activity. And you could see the Man/Woman relation, not just as a concept that Marx had elaborated in his Humanist Essays, but as what was actually happening, practically parallel to each other, in those years, whether it was international, whether it was women's liberation, or whether it was totally new human relations.

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Now it was exactly those 1848 Revolutions that became the ground for Rosa Luxemburg and her activity in the 1905 Revolution. [At this point, Dunayevskaya displayed a reproduction of Rosa Luxemburg's self-portrait.] This is not just a picture; it is, rather, a picture of a self-portrait. The reason I am showing it is not to demonstrate her multi-dimensionality, or the fact that she was an artist, or even the fact that she was the only one who really knew herself. (It wasn't beautiful, it was the form and force and reason that she wanted to project.) Rather, I am showing it to you to illuminate Luxemburg's first statement when she met the 1905 Revolution: "The revolution is magnificent; all else is bilge."

She didn't mean what some think: "Oh, she didn't really care for art," and so on. What she was trying to stress was that when you see masses in motion you

realize there is no such thing as individual genius. No matter how great, the genius cannot transform society. It is masses in motion that transform. So this universal is not just a new Humanism, but an attempt to see the movement from practice that is itself a form of theory, and the movement from theory to practice which would unite to bring about the total uprooting of a class society and the establishment of new human relations.

Luxemburg was experiencing several important developments in this period. First, take the fact that other revolutionaries were trying to keep her from returning to Poland from Germany to take part in the revolution. She was in the German Social Democracy. She was in the Russian Revolution. In fact, the world was her country; she didn't believe in nationalism. In that world of revolution there was one thing on which she bowed to Jogiches, her lover, colleague and comrade: he was the best for underground work, and a real "organization man," while she was hardly interested in organization work. Jogiches was in Poland, but her fellow revolutionaries told her not to return there because, as a woman, she would be destroyed faster. That was enough to set Luxemburg off to Poland at once. (The Russian Revolution is the one that became famous, but the truth of the matter is that it started in Poland.) She became involved in all the great events that were occurring. And in the course of those events Luxemburg saw that there is something very different and unusual about a mass strike as the preliminary to revolution. Instead of just being a strike to better the conditions of work, or win better pay, it became combined with political demands. And these weren't any tiny political demands, nor even just for suffrage. No, the demand was, "Down with Tzarism!"

She saw one other thing. Overnight her little group, of what she called "seven and a half members," became a mass movement, 20,000 strong. Now when she saw that, no matter how much she loved Jogiches, no matter how much they were in the same movement, (and there was no difference between them as revolutionaries, as Marxists), she had a different view of organization. The relationship between spontaneity and organization was different. She suddenly saw that the Russians and Poles who were supposed to be "backward" had something to teach the "advanced" German Social Democracy. She said that the illiterate Polish peasants and workers and the Russians could make a revolution while the German Social Democracy was, at best, only talking about one more vote in the elections, because the revolution accepts no schoolmaster. The revolutionaries would not accept elitism.

In this revolution, then, Luxemburg developed the concept of mass strike; the concept of a tiny group being transformed into a mass organization overnight in an actual revolution; the concept that the masses in motion were actually in advance of her Party. She became not only a writer, but publicist, orator -- a whirlwind of activity -- and, at the same time, she saw that there were all kinds of different relations involved. You want to fly alone when you experience something like that, not because you think that the individual is greater, but because you so much appreciate the spontaneity of the masses. That is what Luxemburg was thinking about when she said, "All else is bilge."

You may think of the first Russian Revolution as only 1905, but the revolutionaries thought of it as 1905 - 1907. They didn't give up until Tzarism threw them in jail and finally destroyed the revolution. It is important to know that, because those were extremely active, history-making years. First of all, this revolution had international ramifications. It spread to Tehran, with a General Strike erupting there in 1905. And their revolution lasted until 1911. In one respect they were

above all the others, and that was in the activity of the women. They created the first women's soviet, or anjumeni, anywhere in the world.

In Poland, Luxemburg was arrested. The revolution had failed. Out of prison, Luxemburg went to Finland, where Lenin, Zinoviev, and Bukharin had also gone. While some were dwelling on the lost revolution, Luxemburg wrote her most important pamphlet, The Mass Strike. That is what she had singled out, among all the activities, as the most important thing that had happened. They were also preparing for a Russian Social Democratic Party Congress to be held in London, in 1907. It was the only Congress where every tendency attended; a revolution is that kind of an inspiration. There were Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries, Bundists, and even a few Anarchists. They were trying to draw conclusions from the experiences of the revolution on where they would go next.

Now, there is, I am sorry to say, very little of Luxemburg published in English, but a particularly brilliant speech that Luxemburg made at that 1907 Congress is going to be an Appendix to my new book, Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution. The essence of that speech was: Yes, we are rooted in what Marx had written and done in the 1848 Revolutions, and in the conclusions he drew about the "revolution in permanence," about the workers never again being with the bourgeoisie in their struggles. But, she added, anyone who thinks that 1905 is the end of the nineteenth century revolutions is wrong. Instead, she posed it as the beginning of a new series of revolutions, proletarian revolutions, where they would really establish new societies instead of constantly being defeated.

Her activity in that 1905 Revolution itself; her 1906 pamphlet on the revolution entitled The Mass Strike; and her participation in the 1907 Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Party were three highpoints of Luxemburg's activity. The same year that the Russian Congress met, was also when the International Congress met. Like the Russian, it was the most important of all the congresses because all the world socialists were there. Here, it was Luxemburg's brilliance and intellectual understanding of the revolutions and where they were going that predominated over everything, because she was beginning to feel the opportunism within the German Social Democracy. She was afraid that the Social Democracy would not really be against the bourgeoisie if war should break out. The Left of the Party drafted an amendment to the resolution on militarization which declared that Socialists would never participate in a capitalist war, and Luxemburg's name was so important that all the tendencies of the Left decided to make her their spokeswoman. Here is who gave over to her their right to speak: Lenin, Martov, Trotsky, and Plekhanov. (The amendment won, but the German Social Democracy did, in the end, vote the Kaiser war credits.)

That doesn't end 1907. It was that year that the greatest Marxist school started, in Berlin, and Luxemburg became the teacher who was most beloved. She credits her teaching with posing the kind of questions that later helped her to develop what became her most important theoretical work, Accumulation of Capital. (It was a deviation from Marx, but it was her greatest work.)

Even that doesn't end all her activity in 1907. The first International Women's Conference was held that year, as well, and Zetkin and Luxemburg were the inspiration for all others there. Kollontai came from Russia, Balabanoff from Italy, and all these great revolutionary women established international communications among

themselves. Luxemburg gave a report. She was the only woman on the International Socialist Bureau (ISB) which had suggested that the women move their center to Brussels where the ISB had its headquarters. Luxemburg told the women not to move because it would mean the end of their autonomy as a women's movement. She said if they stuck with Zetkin and remained in Stuttgart they could be both Marxists and in women's liberation.

Now here is what I want to ask academia: Nettl's biography of Luxemburg is the greatest, most comprehensive book written on her so far. He is sympathetic to the woman, both to her ideas and to the fact that she was so important in three different movements -- the Polish, the German, the Russian. And yet how does he see those magnificent years that I have just described? He calls them "The Lost Years"! Why? I think the women may have guessed, if they remembered that there was a break-up between Luxemburg and Jogiches during this period. Isn't it a typical male attitude on the part of Nettl to think that once you have broken with your lover (if you are a woman -- a man breaks with his lover all the time), then all life is lost for you? Yes, that is why he calls it "The Lost Years." He knows about the revolution; he knows about Luxemburg's writing; he knows about all three congresses -- yet that is his conclusion. Contrast that to what Luxemburg said of the same period: "I am only I once more since I have become free of Leo." She wanted to fly alone.

What comes next is Luxemburg's break with Kautsky. That was a serious and totally political break that came about, not because she wanted to fly alone, but because Kautsky was moving to the right. Everyone still considered him their teacher, Lenin included, but she already smelled the opportunism of what she was later to call the "stinking corpse" of the Second International, when war broke out. She saw it back in 1910, when the German gunboat, the Panther, was sent to Morocco. Luxemburg said it was the beginning of imperialism. She began to break with Kautsky, though she remained in the German Social Democracy.

There is no time today to go into all the rest of her development, including her eventual counter-posing of reality and theory. This is all developed in my new book.

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For now, I want to move, instead, to three periods in world history that are all concerned with what is called "women's war." Here is where we will see a connection between Marx's great last writing, The Ethnological Notebooks, and his very early writing, the Manuscripts of 1844 -- the Essays in which he called his philosophy a "new Humanism," and brought out the Man/Woman relationship and not only the class struggle. In The Ethnological Notebooks he returned to the question of primitive society. (It was not because he thought we could put a refrigerator into primitive communism and have the new society; Engels' The Origin of the Family may have leaned a little toward that kind of concept, but that wasn't Marx's work.)

Here is what was involved: Marx found out by reading Morgan's Ancient Society that the Iroquois women, who were supposed to be "backward," had a lot more privileges than we have, including the fact that they both suggested the person who should be Chief and could remove him. Removing him was called "knocking off his horns."

If he didn't do right (including starting a war they didn't approve), they would "knock off the horns" of the Chief. In his Ethnological Notebooks Marx showed that in primitive societies that are supposed to be backward, the women had more rights than in "advanced" societies. Marx also contrasted British imperialism to the Irish women on property rights.

Not let's move to 1929, to Eastern Nigeria, and to their "Women's War," which British imperialism called "the Aba riots." Here is what that was: In their ancient tradition when a man didn't do right by his wife, the African women would all come to his hut and sing the most insulting songs they could think of, including questioning his manhood; then they would take their mallets, which they used to pound their yams, and they would bang and bang on his hut until he came out and apologized. But in 1929, the women said, Why should we only do it against an individual man who did wrong by his wife, why not against the British imperialists who are trying to tax us? The British had never taxed the women before; now they were trying to do that. The women had asked the men to be with them, but the chiefs had thought they couldn't win against British imperialism. So the women decided to conduct a Women's War both against their own chiefs and against the British imperialists. They won it, but not before the British imperialists brought in the army, and killed forty women. They established new rules, but the tax was never imposed.

Now let's take an entirely different period -- 1863, in Poland. Marx favored all Polish struggles against Tzarism because Russia was a huge empire which had to be destroyed. He was for anyone who would shake it up, even if it included the aristocracy fighting for national freedom. He was for the self-determination of nations. But what we find is that in Poland legend calls 1863 the "Women's War." And we also find that the ^{strike} in Warsaw erupted when the Tzarist police had the gall to demand that any woman who worked in a factory must undergo the same physical examination as a prostitute.

When you see a Women's War in three such different nations, and in three such different periods, it is evident that not only was something very wrong, but that there was a consciousness as to how wrong it was, and how deep was the uprooting needed

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Now let's return to Luxemburg.

It is true that Luxemburg kept quiet about the male chauvinism in the German Social Democracy, just as she ^{kept} quiet about her artistry. She took a lot from the men because she felt it was more important to defeat reformism than to fight for her right not to be called "a weird sister," or worse, as she was called even by Kautsky and Bebel. But my book will show that she was active in the women's struggles in every single respect, whether it was that 1907 International Women's Congress that I referred to; whether it was the very first organizational tour she took when she landed in Germany in 1899; or whether it was the anti-war movement, in which the women were the majority and aligned with Rosa Luxemburg. The very first international anti-war conference was accomplished by the women in Bern in the spring of 1915, after the Second International collapsed in voting war credits to the Kaiser. It was organized by Luxemburg and Zetkin, but the Prussians, knowing very well what a revolutionary Luxemburg was, hurried her off to jail before she could go to the conference.

Prison did not stop her work, whether it was her famous anti-war thesis, or whether it was a question of the individual letters she sent out from her jail cell. I want to read to you what she wrote to Mathilde Wurm on New Year's Eve, 1916. Mathilde Wurm was a Social-Democrat, and even though she wasn't among those who voted war credits, she was among those who rationalized why the others did so. Luxemburg wrote to her: "I'm telling you that as soon as I can stick my nose out again I will hunt and harrÿ your society of frogs with trumpet blasts, whip crackings, and bloodhounds -- like Penthesilea I wanted to say, but by God, you people are no Achilles."

Penthesilea was the Queen of the Amazons, and Luxemburg suddenly makes reference to her in this letter in which she is really talking about the 1914 struggle against war. Now listen to how she ended her letter: "Have you had enough of a New Year's greeting now? Then see to it that you stay human Being human 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. Ach, I know of no formula to write you for being human ... " It is this concept of an entirely different world that we are dealing with.

Time forces me to end. But I want to leave you with two very different things -- one is what I wrote in Philosophy and Revolution on the present Women's Movement, and the other is what I said to the Hegel Society of America on "Hegel's Absolute Idea as New Beginning." I want to combine them here for you today.

In Philosophy and Revolution I wrote: "The uniqueness of today's Women's Liberation movement is that it dares to challenge what is, including the male chauvinism not only under capitalism but within the revolutionary movement itself. To fear to expose this male chauvinism leads to helplessness. To face reality, and to face it not through sheer voluntarism, but with full awareness of all the forces lined up against us, is the one way to assure the coalescence with other revolutionary forces, especially labor, which is so strategically placed in production and has its own black dimension. But the fact that it will not be possible fully to overcome male chauvinism as long as class society exists does not invalidate the movement any more than any struggle for freedom in invalidated. On the contrary, the very fact that there is a widespread Women's Liberation movement proves that it is an idea whose time has come and that it is an integral part of the very organism of liberation."

To the Hegel Society of America I said: "In his re-examination of Hegel, Professor Findlay was right when he stated Hegel's exegeses 'can seem arid and false to those who see nothing mysterious and god-like in the facts of human thought.' But isn't it equally true that philosophers who stand only in terror before revolution not only do not 'comprehend' it, they cannot fully comprehend the revolution in thought? And Hegel did revolutionize philosophy. Absolute Idea as new beginning can become a new 'subjectivity' for realizing Hegel's principle, that 'the transcendence of the opposition between Notion and Reality, and that unity which is truth, rest upon this subjectivity alone.' This is not exactly a summons to the barricades, but Hegel is asking us to have our ears as well as our categories so attuned to the 'Spirit's urgency' that we rise to the challenge of working out, through 'patience, seriousness, suffering and labor of the negative,' a totally new relationship of philosophy to the actuality and action as befits a 'birth-time of history.'"

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