

August 20, 1982

To Women's Liberation - News & Letters Committees:

Dear Comrades:

Being a most concrete person, who is nevertheless always rooted in the "three books, not one" -- especially the new book, Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution, and especially Chapter 8 on "The Task that Remains to be Done: The Unique and Unfinished Contributions of Today's Women's Liberation Movement" -- I found I was not fully satisfied with the last page of that Part II. Here are the two additions I thought of:

1) In the third paragraph from the end, which criticizes the old concept of woman as "helpmate," I think what should be added is:

Quite the contrary. History proves a very different truth, whether we look at February 1917, where the women were the ones who initiated the revolution; whether we turn further back to the Persian Revolution of 1906-11, where the women created the very first women's soviet; or whether we look to our own age in the 1970s in Portugal, where Isabel do Carmo raised the totally new concept of apartidarismo. It is precisely because women's liberationists are both revolutionary force and Reason that they are crucial. If we are to achieve success in the new revolutions, we have to see that the uprooting of the old is total from the start.

2) And in the penultimate paragraph, which ends with "do not separate practice from theory," add the sentence:

Which is what Luxemburg meant when she defined "being human" as "joyfully throwing your life on the scales of destiny."

My point in making these two suggestions for additions is that this sort of thing must be in each one's mind very nearly every time they speak on the new book. Each one must not only concretize the book further, day in & day out, between now and when you embark on your journeys of "Have Thumb, Will Travel," for it's only in that way that the projection of Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution will result not only in organizational growth, but, indeed, in helping to lay the ground for the American Revolution.

Please discuss this letter at your Conference on September 3 after you will have heard Suzanne's national report, Anne's Latin American report, and have had at least an hour's discussion from the floor.

Something has struck me very strongly these days when I seem to be reading Women's Liberation material in a truly global framework, from Iran to Africa -- and that is that, despite the very nearly limitless outpouring of multitudinous views, it all ends up in a single question. The one thing that all seem to demand, when they reject our view of woman as Reason as well as revolutionary force, is "proof" that women are Reason. Even the reformists do seem to accept that women are revolutionary force -- but don't like the word "revolutionary," and seem to prefer to talk, instead, about how things must "change." And those who do aspire to revolution nevertheless seem weighted down by their own aspirations. They seem so conscious that it is the longest revolution even in which the change must begin at the very start, that they wind up feeling that since we have never had either

15350

true equality or exercised any sort of leadership, there is no hope it will ever change. They themselves fall into the trap of considering the men truly superior, but simply saying men have a lot of chances that we don't. It seems to me imperative to tell them not to make any such conclusions until after they have really gone through history and seen human beings as the makers of that history.

Take the question of slavery and the two points at which Black women raised new kinds of questions -- one of which led to a separation from their own Black leaders, while the other involved the whole question of names. I am, of course, referring to Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth and their differences with Frederick Douglass, who had said that the struggle for women's suffrage must be given up if they were to win any suffrage for Black men. The way it has been argued ever since -- and Angela Davis even goes so far as to say that Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth were wrong and Frederick Douglass was right, because, in fact, they wouldn't have won anything if they had burdened their fight with the demand also for women's suffrage -- has been to reduce it all to a question of tactics. That is exactly how "they" always win. Instead of totality and dialectics we get reductionism and eclecticism. A principle gets reduced to the question of the immediate tactic required, and if the times prove that you cannot go further, you are told to forget the principle, which is the ground for future theory. If even Douglass was right on the question of tactic, should he not have said (if he had caught the new and the great contribution Sojourner Truth had made): "while we cannot be for that at this moment, let's make sure to include that, as the principle we will fight for and will never retreat from. Indeed, we ourselves must dive deeper into what it is the women are demanding, which involves a total view of the relationship of Man to Woman far beyond the mere question of the vote." Wouldn't that have kept the men from forgetting the principle raised by the women until it reappeared as a revolution 100 years later?

That, no doubt, is speculative -- but then I am only quoting a few examples -- not because there aren't dozens or even hundreds more, from 1289 to 1848; from 1848 to (1871); from 1871 to (1905) and even when we have no revolution, as in the 1930s, there was Ding Ling who saw what happened to the women revolutionaries who became the wives of leaders, calling them "the Noras who came home." Ah, what great dialectic there is in that one, and what a critique of the leadership from Mao down -- or up.

Or take the simple question of Sojourner Truth's name. If you deal with it only as a biographical note, you can even make a beautiful picture of "Ain't I a Woman?" and think you have captured the historic moment. Have you? Poetry may not be as much of a reductionism as tactics, but it, too, is a narrowing of the totalization needed, of not just being anti-male but establishing freedom. In both cases, when it is not left as a matter of what is "realistic" at a specific moment, or a matter of the superiority of language, it can be seen as a question of what it signifies as Reason at each stage of freedom.

(If anyone thinks I am talking only of slavery times, let them read the latest writings from today's French NLM, and see whether they have gone further than the question of "language", that is, getting rid of all male connotations to make it truly women's language. You will find that when it comes to principles, they are totally dependent on the male analysts, even when they reject those like Freud and Lacan, because they follow their principles, nonetheless. See "Women's Liberation in France: The Tenth Year" by Christine Delphy, in Feminist Issues.)

Let's move to a different period, the greatest in Marx's time -- the Paris Commune. Marx certainly practiced his concepts of women's liberation, including autonomy, and didn't leave out the question of individuality when he sent Dmitrieva to Paris. But, inside the German Social-Democracy over three decades later,

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wasn't it a fact that Luxemburg met with more than a whiff of male-chauvinism -- and from the very people who were the "leaders" on women's liberation? (The two main texts for the so-called Woman Question were Bebel's Woman and Socialism and Engels' Origin of the Family.) She fought all right, but she fought it as an individual woman leader who was being discriminated against, and who definitely showed them she wouldn't stand for it. How does that help Women's Liberation, as a movement? It doesn't. Which doesn't mean that today's WLM doesn't have very much to gain both from her feminist dimension (whether she was conscious of it or not) and from the dialectics of the class struggle, the General Strike, the revolution. When I say that her attitude didn't help the movement in her period, I mean that a single person, no matter how great, no matter how original, no matter how much she lived her own life, simply proved she was "different" -- as if all women didn't aspire to such freedom. Thus, that magnificent expression: "I am only I since I am free of Leo", missed entering history. What is worse, for the history of her own period, is that without having seriously worked out the dialectic of Subject, she did not see that the women in the anti-war movement were there as revolutionary Reason, as ground and essence of what did become the German Revolution.

Take also that magnificent invocation of Penthesilea. Think how great and contradictory is that return to the queen of the Amazons at the height of the fight against the imperialist war, the fight for revolution, and the demand to put yourself on the scales of destiny for creating a new, truly human society. She surpassed all others in raising the question of continuing democracy, revolutionary democracy, after the conquest of power. In that, too, whether she recognized it or not, the question of woman as Reason was certainly involved.

It is the task for this age to work out what has been raised, not only by Luxemburg, but by Karl Marx. The maturity of our age is marked by three characteristics: 1) The uniqueness of today's WLM is that it has raised the question of male chauvinism right within the revolutionary organization itself; 2) The passion for philosophy that did emerge in the 1970s after the defeat of 1968 coincided with the greatest post-war economic crisis since the Depression, the new category of the Third World, and the most total crisis of all, the threat of nuclear war; 3) We cannot, therefore, reduce this passion for philosophy to the type of reductionism that has appeared at the height of today's WLM -- and by height I mean the one represented by Sheila Rowbotham, who is both revolutionary socialist and appreciative of working women, but nevertheless reduces it all to "an organizing principle."

We must insist that what is needed is a philosophy of revolution instead of the Party-to-lead, even if that calls itself the "organizing principle." What Karl Marx did that none others had done was to pose the question of the total uprooting which is needed, and to give us the ground for seeing woman as Reason and not only as revolutionary force. It is this which we must project and concretize. The task that remains to be done begins with "Have Thumb Will Travel" and doesn't end until we have made the ground for the American revolution.

Yours,

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