

June, 1983

## 'American Civilization on Trial'



by Charles Denby, Editor

Author of *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal*

*I would like to share with our readers the following letter I wrote to Raya Dunayevskaya.*

Dear Raya:

When we decided this spring to come out with a new edition of *American Civilization on Trial* on the 20th anniversary of its publication, I was never so glad for anything in my life. I feel that the crisis in Black freedom today is the most serious one we have faced since the days of the Civil Rights Movement when our pamphlet was published while the Black youth filled the streets of Birmingham, Ala. For the last few weeks I have been thinking about what we should include in the new Introduction, and I would like to make some suggestions.

What kept coming to the front of my mind was the fact that 1983 is also the Marx centenary, which makes it a good time to focus on how inseparable this Marxist-Humanist study of American history we created 20 years ago is from what you have just worked out on Karl Marx's last decade as the "trail to the 1960s." Over the years since *American Civilization on Trial* was printed, many people have asked how we came to see American history as "Black masses as vanguard." That is the expression we used to show the relationship of the Black freedom struggle to both white labor and to Black intellectuals.

The truth is that we had looked long and hard at the American movement and at Marx's life and work before we were able to write the pamphlet. Marx's philosophy of revolution was always at the center of our thinking. This is why I was actually glad in a way that your new book, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* was already locked up in print when you decided to "add" a new paragraph to its conclusion summing up Marx's views on the Black Dimension at your lecture for the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies at the University of Michigan. I felt very strongly that this new paragraph should be the focus of the Introduction to the new edition of *American Civilization on Trial* (ACOT).

What do you think? Just re-read it now and see how it does away with all the attempts to isolate the last 20 years of the Black struggle in the USA. Many times when I hear members of Left parties or narrow nationalists speak about our movement, they act as though it could be torn out of the international context of freedom struggles. But that is exactly opposite to what we showed in ACOT and what Marx did all his life.

You know, Raya, when I went back to study the pamphlet again, I kept seeing how the international context was there from the beginning. You had included right in the pamphlet your trip to West Africa in 1962 and some of the interviews you had there, like the one with Dr. Akiwe from Nigeria. It wasn't just that we were singling out a "two-way road to the African Revolutions." It was that we made an actual trip there to try to develop that road in person.

And in 1970, when I wrote an appendix to ACOT called "Black Caucuses in the Unions," I pointed out that the young people today aren't thinking of changing this or that leader; "They are thinking in terms of a complete change — of revolution." This is true throughout the world today.

So, Raya, whatever else we decide to write for the 20th anniversary of our pamphlet, I strongly feel that your new paragraph should be the focus. We need to put right in the beginning the world context of our struggle and the way our view of it is rooted in Marx. I would like to let all the readers see that paragraph for themselves, so I am quoting it here in full:

"Marx's reference in the *Ethnological Notebooks* to the Australian aborigine as 'the intelligent black' brought to a conclusion the dialectic he had unchained when he first broke from bourgeois society in the 1840s and objected to the use of the word, 'Negro,' as if it were synonymous with the word, 'slave.' By the 1850s, in the *Grundrisse*, he extended that sensitivity to the whole pre-capitalist world. By the 1860s, the Black dimension became, at one and the same time, not only pivotal to the abolition of slavery and victory of the North in the Civil War, but also to the restructuring of Capital itself. In a word, the often-quoted sentence: 'Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the Black skin it is branded,' far from being rhetoric, was the actual reality and the perspective for overcoming that reality. Marx reached, at every historic turning point, for a concluding point, not as an end but as a new jumping-off point, a new beginning, a new vision."