

BOOK REVIEW

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Raya Dunayevskaya
Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and
Marx's Philosophy of Revolution
Harvester Press : Sussex, 1983.

In the last decade we have been witness to the birth of a new women's movement within the Third World, and often times during a revolutionary period. The first challenge to Khomeini's regime, we should remind ourselves, came from the Iranian women who only a few weeks after the overthrow of the Shah came to the streets proclaiming "In the dawn of freedom we have no freedom."

In the 1970s the former colonies of Guinea Bissau, Mozambique and Angola as well as Zimbabwe, and the Central America of the Nicaraguan Revolution and the revolutionary movements of EL Salvador and Guatemala, have all shown us a new image of the Third World woman as revolutionary and as feminist.

Because these revolutions have called themselves socialist and often Marxist, the question of the relationship of Marxism to feminism is not limited to a debate among feminists and Marxists in the industrialized world. Rather it has become a burning issue vis-a-vis the future direction of revolutions in the Third World.

It is for this reason that we welcome a recent work, Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution. In Dunayevskaya's work Rosa Luxemburg, probably the greatest woman theoretician and leader that the Marxist movement has produced, comes alive in a new way—as a feminist.

She was active in the Second International, the largest socialist organization of the late 19th and early 20th century Europe. Luxemburg became the first to recognize the new stage of capitalism—imperialism—even before Lenin and sharply criticized the leadership of the German Social Democracy who preferred to ignore the imperialist intrusion of their own government in Africa.

We see her passionately involved in the women's suffrage movement and the anti-militarist movement which, very much like today's Peace Movements included a majority of women. She collaborated with Clara Zetkin, editor of the woman's magazine of the international Gleichheit, in the activities of the women's organization and the magazine. Luxemburg insisted that the women's organization of the Second

International remain autonomous from the headquarters of the International Socialist Bureau to which she was the only woman leader. Finally there is the relationship of Luxemburg to Leo Jogiches, her lover and life long comrade, that Dunayevskaya views in a new light as an expression of "the personal is political".

Make no mistake, her emphasis on the feminist dimension of Luxemburg is not because she tries to ram the example of Luxemburg and Zetkin (in the tradition of the old Left) down the throat of today's women activists. In fact she writes,

"Stop telling us, even through the voices of (the old Left) how great the German Socialist Women's Movement was. We know how many working women's groups Clara Zetkin organized and that it was a real mass movement -- We also know that none of them Zetkin and Luxemburg included had brought out the male chauvinism in the Party.

.... Under no circumstances will we let you hide your male chauvinist behaviour under the shibboleth 'The social revolution comes first'."

To straighten out this "shibboleth", therefore, she examines the relation of Marxism and feminism in a way that challenges our previous conception of both 1) She presents the previously unknown feminist dimension of Rosa Luxemburg and challenges the WLM to redefine the whole concept of what is revolutionary feminism 2) She traces Marx's concept of woman throughout his 40 years of writings—not that it is Marx's concept that she stresses not Trotsky's or Lenin's or Bebel's or even Frederick Engels.

Dunayevskaya was the first nearly 30 years ago to translate Marx's early Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 into English. In these essays Marx measured the humanity of society through the relationship of man to woman and wrote,

"...The direct natural necessary relationship of man to man is the relationship of man to woman-- from this relationship it follows to what degree man as a species has become human--"

Now in her last work, Dunayevskaya analyzes the writings of the last decade of Marx's life and for the first time discusses these Ethnological Notebooks of Marx (published in 1970) as they relate to the question of women in the so-called primitive societies including women in India, Iroquois Indian-American and Irish women.

Her point is that Marx was studying the possibility of social revolution in the underdeveloped lands (The Third World) in this last decade and was looking for indigenous revolutionary subjects such as the peasantry or the women, who were capable of transforming these societies from within.

She therefore carries this methodology to today and argues that women are the leading and most audacious elements in modern revolutions, especially in the Third world where they have been fighting not only despotism and sexism but religion and centralized forms of organization and have manifested for the first time a totally new alternative in the revolutions of the underdeveloped lands.

This is certainly a very different way of looking at the feminist movement in the Third World and it would seem that far from being the 'backward' sisters of western feminists, Third World women have a better chance of practising revolutionary feminism. The crucial point becomes transcending the experience of the Western feminists, that is grasping both the high point of the WLM worldwide and recognizing its pitfalls in the west including the refusal to recreate the dialectics of Marx for today.

[The reviewer is active in the Iranian women's movement and teaches Women's History in the Middle East.]

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