

# Theory/ Practice NEWS & LETTERS

Human Power is its own end—Marx

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## A letter to Adrienne Rich

by Raya Dunayevskaya

author of *Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution: Reaching for the Future*.

*Editor's Note: Adrienne Rich's review of Raya Dunayevskaya's major writings appeared in the September, 1986 Women's Review of Books. Excerpts were reprinted in the November N&L. Raya Dunayevskaya asked us to share with our readers part of her response to Adrienne Rich's review.*

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Dear Adrienne Rich:

Your review of my four major works created an adventurous journey for me. It was an adventure because it showed that not only does the uniqueness, the newness of today's Women's Liberation Movement no longer stand in the way of its appreciation of Rosa Luxemburg, the great revolutionary Marxist feminist, but it poses as well other critiques to today's Marxism.

The simultaneity of the appearance of Women's Liberation—that had developed from an Idea whose time had come to a Movement—and the appearance of the transcription of Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* led me to think (evidently wrongly) that the work I was rushing to completion—*Philosophy and Revolution*—with its final chapter tackling “new passions and new forces,” would result in a veritable union of radical feminism and Marxist-Humanism.

Instead, as you so cogently expressed it in your review, “...a term like ‘Marxist-Humanism’ would, in the late sixties and early seventies, have sounded like a funeral knell,” to the Women's Liberation Movement at that time.

From the reception (mostly the lack of it) of my works by so-called orthodox Marxists, on the one hand, and by radical feminists, on the other hand, I felt that both the radical feminists and the post-Marx Marxists lack a philosophy of revolution needed for total revolution. It became clear to me that the Marxists were raised on Engelsian Marxism, not Marx's Marxism, i.e., what Marx from the very start called “a new Humanism...”

It seemed to me that not only was a critique of Women's Liberation Movement needed, but it was also necessary to draw up a balance sheet about that missing link—philosophy—not only in the Women's Liberation Movement, but among even the great Marxist revolutionaries.

Pardon me for smiling at the word “academic” in your description of *Philosophy and Revolution* as “the most academic.” What is true is that way back in 1950 when I was active in the Miners' General Strike and writing the dispatches also on the miners' wives, I also dug deep into a study of Hegel's works. Having never been part of academia, (I'm 76), I was not even aware that when, in 1953, I first broke through to a new concept of Hegel's Absolutes,\* I had broken with the whole Hegelian tradition which saw Hegel's Absolutes as a hierarchical system. Instead, I saw in the Absolute, new beginnings, a movement from practice as well as from theory.

This is why Marx never let go of the Hegelian dialectic, which he saw as “the source of all dialectics.” Marx held Absolute Negativity—“the negation of the negation”—to be an active creativity that Feuerbachian materialism's critique of Hegel's idealism had not matched. Marx's dialectical, historical materialism did not depart in its critique of Hegel though Marx had discovered a whole new continent of thought and revolution, of class struggles, of the Man/Woman relationship—in a word, “revolution in permanence.”

It was only when the turbulent 1960s ended with De Gaulle winning in Paris, 1968, without firing a shot, at the very height of that massive activity that had relegated theory to something that could supposedly be caught “en route,” that I finally felt compelled publicly to delve into that missing dimension of philosophy—the Hegelian dialectic that Marx had been rooted in. To tackle the dialectics of thought and revolution, was, I held, what all the new passions and new forces needed to have as their ground. I knew I was treading uncharted waters, not only among Women's Liberationists, but among orthodox Marxists, but I did not expect the response to my findings would be such total silence.

You have hit the nail on the head when you wrote: “If, indeed, Marx was moving in such a direction, we can't leap forward from Marx without understanding where he left off and what he left to us.” That's what I thought I was doing when I concretized the task as the need to work out the new signalled by the 1950s that I had designated a movement from practice that is itself a form of theory. I involved myself in the recording of those new voices beginning with the miners on general strike, and their wives, in those activities against that machine, the “continuous miner,” which they called a “man killer.” With it they had posed the question: “What kind of labor should man do?...”

Passions, I might add—and Marx was a great one to talk about “new forces and new passions”—were not restricted to what Audre Lorde calls the “erotic as power.” Any struggle for new human relations required not only philosophy and revolution, but self-development, and that both the day of revolution and the day after. That nothing new, much less a totally new society, could be achieved coldbloodedly shows that the creative urge demanded passion. This is what brought forth from Marx such new language as “time is space for human development”—and that in an article on economics.

\*Over a decade after those Letters on the Absolute Idea were written, (see my Archives, The Raya Dunayevskaya Collection at Wayne State University, pp. 2431-66 and pp. 5041-5109), as I began writing my draft chapters of *Philosophy and Revolution*, I found that Hegel scholars had left the three final syllogisms of Hegel's *Encyclopedia* (paragraphs 575, 576, 577) fairly untouched, without realizing that it was not Logic, but Nature that had been the mediation, the ground for the self-movement of the Idea, from *Phenomenology*, *Science of Logic*, *Philosophy of Nature*, *Mind*, i.e. the whole *Encyclopedia*.

Towards the end of your review of my books, you place a whole new series of problems before me. You single out "the edges of struggle," asking me to expand on the question of women's liberation's relationship to revolution, since sexuality—"neither sexual purity nor sexual liberation"—has established any relationship to revolution. What remains "still unclear (is) how, and by what historical forces heterosexuality has been socially constructed; the degree to which lesbian and gay liberation has been a revolutionary force; how actual sexual practice informs theory; the conditions under which sex is work, recreation, or in Audre Lorde's phrase, 'the erotic is power.'

My problem is: how can I answer the specificity of sexuality in the sense it is now used without seeming to slough it off if I reply: You are the one who must do it; workers work out their own emancipation and Blacks theirs, so must all other forces of revolution—youth, women, and women not just in general, but the very concrete question of lesbianism, or, for that matter, all of homosexuality.

It is true that women revolutionaries in the 19th and early 20th century referred to sexuality (if they used the word at all), and meant by it only the discrimination against women in labor and wages, never bringing the topic in to the "Party", as if it had no relation to men in the movement. And it is true that by the mid-20th century, when we began posing the subject, we were still referring, not to specific practices, but using the word sex as if it encompassed homosexual as well as heterosexual, and thus leaving the impression that we actually narrowed sexism to conditions of labor, class struggle, or race, rather than different sex practices. What was true was that as revolutionaries we were always putting the priority on the dialectics of revolution.

I believe that where I have had the greatest experience with a specific force of revolution demanding proof of the concreteness of freedom for itself is with the Black Dimension. I have been active there from literally the first moment I, a Ukrainian, landed on these shores, the first time I saw a Black man. I asked who was that. I took myself from the Jewish ghetto to the Black Ghetto in the 1920s. In the 1960s, on the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, we embarked on a short history of the whole Black Dimension in American history, *American Civilization on Trial*, which had as its subtitle, "Black Masses as Vanguard." I was questioned by a Black woman in the late '60s about what the concept of freedom in Marxist-Humanism means to Black women.

Without feeling that I was evading her question, my answer stressed the fact that, far from Marxist-Humanist philosophy limiting us in the fight for total freedom for all, it led me to the creation of the category, "Woman as Revolutionary Reason as well as Force," and that before women's liberation had moved from an Idea to a Movement. I pointed to Black women speaking for themselves in *News & Letters* not only as activists, but as columnists such as Ethel Dunbar in "Way of the World" and the development of a "Woman as Reason" column. I had to respond that each revolutionary force does have to concretize the question for what it considers, holds, as the proof that freedom is here and does relate to them. No one can do it for Other.

I then embarked on collecting 35 years of my writing for *Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution*. Clearly, dialectics of revolution was still my preoccupation. This time, however, I wanted to single out women as the subject. The aim was to show how total the uprooting of the old must be, be it in work, or culture, or leisure, or self. And with it, how total freedom must be, which was the meaning of Marx's "revolution in permanence," that is, to continue after the overthrow of the old, at which point the task becomes most difficult, as it involves nothing short of such full self-development that the division between mental and manual is finally abolished.

The Introduction/Overview to that book, *Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution*, tried to spell out the dialectic of revolution... Where, in Part III of that book, I speak of "Sexism, Politics and Revolution" in various parts of the world, I posed the question without answering it: "Is there an Organizational Answer?" I deliberately didn't answer it there because I feel very strongly that without that missing link—philosophy—there is no answer to the question of organization, which of course means relationship to revolution.

This is exactly what I am in the process of working out in my book-to-be, *Dialectics of Organization and Philosophy: the "Party" and Forms of Organization Born out of Spontaneity*. As you saw from Part IV of my last book, I traced Marx's New Humanism together with the *Dialectics of Women's Liberation in Primitive and Modern Societies*. Here is how I phrased it in my new working papers: "Put briefly, Women's Liberation is the first dialectic of revolution when it is relationship—when it comes out of—the new epoch itself, which we declared philosophically to be a movement from practice that is itself a form of theory, and absolutely inseparable from revolution. It is those three elements—the epoch, the philosophy, and a new force of revolution—which we, and we alone, named when we saw Women's Liberation not only as Force, but as Reason."

My point was that before Marx learned all those great things about the Iroquois that excited him so much as to create still "new moments" for him, he wrote the first draft of *Capital* (which the Marx-Engels Institute a belated century later called the *Grundrisse*), where he analyzed pre-capitalist society and became sufficiently enamored of those societies that he used a most Hegelian phrase to designate human development—"the absolute movement of becoming."

This discontinuity of epochs becomes creatively original rather than being just an "update" when it is deeply rooted in continuity. The new continent of thought and of revolution that Marx had discovered when he broke with capitalism, as well as with what he called "vulgar communism," and critiqued Hegelian dialectics, he called a "new Humanism." That will remain the ground needed until there has been total uprooting of all forms of capitalism, state as well as private, including capitalist-imperialism. That is first when the Self-Bringing Forth of Liberty brings the Self-Determination of the Idea to maturity and the dialectic is unchained. The Universal and the Individual become one, or, as Hegel put it: "Individualism which lets nothing interfere with its Universalism, i.e. Freedom." We cannot tell in advance what a fully new human being is because we are not.

— Raya Dunayevskaya