

THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT AS REASON AND AS REVOLUTIONARY FORCE

By Raya Dunayevskaya *

Deep in the Siberian mine,
Keep your patience proud;
The bitter toil shall not be lost.
The rebel thought unbowed ...
The heavy-hanging chains will fall,
The walls will crumble at a word;
And Freedom greet you in the light,
And brothers give you back the sword.

As unrelated as this poem by Pushkin about the Decemberist revolt of 1825 may seem to be to the Women's Liberation Movement of our day, the very fact that, in 1953, the political prisoners in the forced labor camps in Vorkuta used it as their freedom song illustrates both the universality and the individuality of liberation struggles. Clearly, the poem celebrated not only a fight against Tsarism. What the 20th century Freedom Fighters aspired to, in fighting also against Communism, was not a return to the old, but a reaching out for a totally new dimension.

It was this aspiration, not only for a particular type of freedom, but for total liberation, that enunciated a new stage of the consciousness of freedom. It is in this sense that the American woman has suddenly begun speaking of her enslavement. All the talk about the American women as "the freest in the world" has not, and will not, stop their feeling chained, their concept of liberation as something a great deal more than simply not being a chattel slave, and having the vote. Their point is that *so long as they are objects* (even where that means an object of love), they are not truly free. They refuse to stand up and shout "hurrah" for such type of "love." They demand to be whole human beings.

Ever since the myth of Eve giving Adam the apple was created, women have been presented as devils or as angels, but definitely not as human beings. Only one philosopher, Hegel, related the myth, not to sin, but to knowledge. No doubt the concept of knowledge is an improvement on the concept of sin, but that hardly takes issue with why woman is blamed for the expulsion from Paradise. In literature, we seem to have been found guilty ever since. The portrayal of women in our day as either dumb blonds or devils keeps up to date the male chauvinist myth.

Let us begin with Greece, not only as the birthplace of Western Civilization, but the birthplace of the tragic drama. Take the *Oresteia*, the greatest trilogy in dramatic literature. Until fairly recently, I seem to have seen nothing male chauvinistic about Athena's speech. I am sure I am not the only one. The pursuit of the furies, after Orestes murdered his mo-

*Raya Dunayevskaya, author of *Marxism and Freedom*, incorporated in this lecture given to the Ethical Culture Society, Philadelphia, April 26, 1970, some of the points she had made in her talks with WRAP, Chicago University, April 1969, and with a group of the Women's Liberation Coalition, Detroit, July 1970.

ther for having murdered his father, is so unrelenting that the audience is happy when Athena pronounces him not guilty:

So for Orestes shall this vote be cast.
No mother gave me birth, and in all things
Save marriage I, my father's child indeed,
With all my heart commend the masculine,
Wherefore I shall not hold of higher worth
A woman who was killed because she killed
Her wedded lord and master of her home,
Upon an equal vote Orestes wins.

Literature and History: The Black Dimension

All history being contemporary history, we cannot help but look at the same drama with eyes of today, with the consciousness of today's Women's Liberation Movement. This time, when I watched the drama — in Ypsilanti where we tried to recreate the Greek tragedies and comedies in a (more or less) genuine Greek theatre with a Greek director and Judith Anderson as Clytemnestra — I was saying to myself: Well, what do you know, here is Athena telling us that since she sprang full-grown from the forehead of Zeus, it seems that a mother is nothing but a receptacle for the seed of the man and that, therefore, Orestes has not really committed the greatest crime on earth in murdering his mother. Though the words are spoken by a woman, it is a typically male chauvinistic speech. What I am trying to say is that this awareness is what the Women's Liberation Movement of today has brought to today's feminism.

Whether we are talking of the women characters in Greek tragedy — Clytemnestra, Medea, Electra — or whether we look at Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth or that horrible creature in *King Lear* — Goneril — or we come down to the 20th century, be it Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* or Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Flies*, dramatists seem to be doing nothing but updating these characters. The whole point is that literature, even at its greatest, reflects the male-dominated society under which we live, which, in turn, affects all of us, women included. We will not escape male chauvinistic speeches coming out of our mouths until we tear this alienated society up by its roots.

As against the myths of either pre-history or literature, the history of the struggles of women for freedom show women in a very different light. This is especially clear in the US, where the black dimension became a catalyst for liberation long before the Women's Liberation movement of today. It arose during the Abolitionist movement, when the Sojourner Truths and the Harriet Tubmans were speakers, "generals", leaders, while the white women were still, mainly the ones who arranged the picnics, raised the money and in every way were subordinate to the male Abolitionist leaders. When the white middle-class women saw the black women being and acting as leaders of the Underground Railway, the white women decided to be more than handmaidens. The "Suffragette" movement arose out of the Abolitionist Movement.



HARRIET TUBMAN



LUCY STONE



SOJOURNER TRUTH

For some peculiar reason, at their very first convention in 1848, the women still felt a man should function as chairman of their meetings. They soon found out that, though the Abolitionist Movement was by far the most advanced movement of the time, it nevertheless held many prejudices on the question of women. The men Abolitionists, who were giving their lives to end slavery, nevertheless refused to chair the meeting of the women. The only one who consented was Frederick Douglass. (In fairness to the founder of Abolitionism, it should be said that when the Anti-Slavery Conference in England refused to seat the American women delegates, forcing them to sit in the balcony, Wm. Lloyd Garrison, who was supposed to give the main speech to the Conference, refused to do so. He sat with the women in the gallery, as a protest.)

So long as they were related to both the black and the proletarian women, the Suffragettes, even though they were middle-class women, went very far in fighting for more than just rights for themselves. But after the abolition of slavery, Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott and all the middle-class women who continued the long bitter fight, nevertheless showed a narrowing of the struggle along class lines. When they finally did get the vote, it was far removed from what the proletarian women needed and were doing. This separation along class lines has not stopped, so that today we must face those degrading TV commercials that try to sell us the idea that the hard-fought battle for equality has been met by our right to wear mini-skirts (at least until fashion dictators tell us otherwise) and having "our own" brand of cigarettes!

As against the past, all of the past, including some of the revolutionary past, and the women who made it in a man's world, today's Women's Liberation Movement not only refuses to stop short of total freedom, but refuses to wait for "the day after" the revolution to obtain it. On the contrary, she will be part of that historic process of making freedom real for all.

The Newness of Today's Women's Liberation Movement

The uniqueness of the WLM is seen also in this, that even the women in the revolutionary movement are saying: "We are not waiting for tomorrow to get our freedom. We're beginning the struggle today. We are

not leaving it to the men comrades to gain freedom 'for' us. We're struggling for it ourselves. We refuse to subordinate it to another movement; the WLM itself is a revolutionary force toward total liberation for all. The very emergence of an independent WLM is proof of the validity of its independent existence. That wasn't created from above; it wasn't built by men, not even by male revolutionaries; it won't fold up so that a political party, as some 'general will', should be pre-eminent."

And I should add that, in distinction to my generation whose aim was to be "just like men" (since they seemed to be having all the privileges), the new generation of "feminists" do not wish to be "just like men." The young women feel that men, too, are alienated beings, and they want to be whole human beings. Having seen revolutions as great as the Russian Revolution go sour, and the Chinese revolution — or Cuban, for that matter — remain incompleting, they have added to their sense of world revolution that it be not only against the old exploitative system, but aim for a totally new society on truly human foundations.

Put differently, they do not consider the relationship of woman to man to be a "private matter" either before or the day of or the day after the revolution. Precisely because it had been dealt with as a private matter, it was easy to play the game of waiting till "the day after." If we are to begin that liberation struggle today — and that's what the women have begun in the past few years — the relationship of man to woman cannot be treated as a private matter, as if it were only a question of husband and wife, or mother and child, or single girl to parents. That is only one more way to make women feel isolated and helpless. Once there is a Women's Liberation Movement, the whole atmosphere of the country changes, so that even where it is a question of establishing personal relations with sweetheart or husband, with father or brother, you don't feel alone any longer, just as you don't feel alone when you fight for the right to have abortions.

Collectivity and individuality have become inseparable not merely because after you have had your fight at home, you can come to the WL meeting and hear of others' struggles, but because of the heightened consciousness which makes you see, be it man or woman, that he or she "is only individualized through the process of history."¹

I am sorry to criticize the organization before which I'm speaking — I do appreciate your inviting me to speak on Women's Liberation. But it shocked me to hear that you still use the word "auxiliary" — Women's Auxiliary of the Ethical Cultural Society. Women are not "auxiliaries." As you saw, the historical origin of the Women's Liberation Movement,

(1) Although the *Grundrisse* as a whole has not been translated into English to this day, the passages both on individualization through history and Marx's view of woman in primitive communism, which differ sharply from Engel's occur in the section that has been published under the title *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*. See especially pages 85,91,96.

even when it centered around getting the vote, was born in opposition to being mere auxiliaries to the Abolitionist Movement. Today, as we shall see later, it is far, far beyond the political struggles for vote or property rights. When I spoke to the Women's Liberation group at Chicago University, they presented me with statistics about how few women are professors, the restrictions on promotions, etc., etc.. Women workers are presenting their demands. It is clear that the struggle will not stop until there will be total liberation.

What is involved now is a whole new philosophy. Where Hegel had moved the myth of Adam and Eve from the theology of sin to the sphere of knowledge, Marx looked at history as a development of labor, and, *therefore*, of the need of a totally new way of life, a philosophy of liberation he called the new Humanism. In his early Humanist essays, he kept reiterating that so long as we talk only about different property forms, we will never get to new human relations, least of all the relationship of man to woman. Private property, Marx insisted, has made us so stupid that we think only of possessions. We are constantly substituting a "to have" for a "to be." But the abolition of private property would not, alone, bring about a new society, as the vulgar communists thought; this Marx insisted, only "negates the personality of man," not to mention the most fundamental of all relations, that of man to woman.

It is this type of totally new relations that many in the Women's Liberation Movement are aspiring to. There are many different varieties of groups, from the so-called grandmother of them all — the National Organization of Women (N.O.W.), which is directed to the professional women — through WRAP which was concerned not merely with the status of women in academia but with actual class struggles (especially those that regard women hospital workers and their demand for a nursery for working mothers), to the Women's Liberation Coalition of Michigan that retains the decentralized small group nuclei. I am mostly concerned with those in Detroit who have issued this pamphlet, *Notes on Women's Liberation — We Speak in Many Voices*, which has black and white and Chicana, both proletarian and students — and who do not separate "culture" from a total philosophy. The many voices include the apolitical as well as the Marxist-Humanist, but the latter are a minority, *deliberately* a minority among the many voices. I would like to read to you two of the pieces by black women contributors. One Ethel Dunbar, criticises the white woman:

Men have run this world out by organizing it into a hate-society. Today that is why white women can't sit down to discuss with black women about women's problems. White men have taught them for so long that they are better than black women, that it keeps coming out all the time. I was at a discussion several weeks ago on the question of women's rights... where one white woman,

an old politico, said she had just left a caucus in her union which had been discussing the problems of women in the shop. The question came up of white women fighting for higher pay, because even black men were getting higher wages than white women. Being a black woman, it made me angry to have it put that way, because it sounded as though white women thought they should make *more* than black men. Black men do hard, hard work. And there is something wrong with that whole way of thinking... White women have to make sure that they do not let white men mix up their thinking.

The other black worker was concerned, instead, with the fact that black women workers "are so busy with other fights around the job and racial discrimination, and they feel these are more important to do first. But really they should all go along together, because they are all in the same vein. I am fighting for someone who is a woman as well as black; to me it is the same fight... I am divorced and it's hard to be alone. But I have enough to do without taking on any more projects, and men are projects."

To try to deny that men are "projects," to feel so self-conscious about women being "apolitical" (and because of that "backward") that you think preoccupation with male chauvinism is to the detriment of "socialist politics" leads, of necessity, to degrading the very concept of revolutionary socialism to a variety of reformism, "a radical feminism commensurate with the reformists' political sophistication and efficacy."² In conclusion, therefore, I wish to turn to a criticism of the "Left," old and new, and to do so from the vantage point of Marx's Humanism.

Marx's Humanism and Today's Marxists

It is not only the young Marx who had demonstrated the decrepit state of capitalism both through exploitation of labor and through an analysis of the five senses in the alienated state that exploitative society imposes on them: "In place of all the physical and spiritual senses, there is the sense of possession, which is the alienation of all these senses." Fragmentation of the individual would continue, the mature Marx of the *Grundrisse* states, so long as we do not reunite man as doer and man as thinker. Indeed, insofar as the enslavement of women is concerned, it occurred within *communal* society itself before the institution of slavery. Furthermore, the free, unpaid labor of wife and child continued after

(2) Most of the quotes that follow are from Claire Moriarty's article in "On Women's Liberation," *New Politics*, Spring 1970. However, I'm actually taking issue with the whole Left, old and new — Stalinists, Maoists, Trotskyists, independent socialists. It just happens that Claire Moriarty has expressed these politicians' views best.

the abolition of chattel slavery.

Marx's whole point is that nothing, nothing short of a new "thoroughgoing Naturalism or Humanism," that is to say, the self-development of men and women (and, for that matter, children, for we all live and suffer from living in what Marx called the "pre-history" of humanity), the reconstitution of being as a laboring, thinking, passionate, whole *human* being signifies a *new* society. Thus the abolition of private capitalism is but the "first negation." This too must be transcended for "only by the transcendence of this mediation (communism)... does there arise *positive* Humanism, beginning from itself."³

As we have shown, this is not only the young Marx (1844), but the Marx of the *Grundrisse* (1857). Indeed, it is Marx at his highest point of activity (theoretically, in *Capital*; practically and politically, in the Paris Commune) and all the way until his death in 1883. *The fetishism that Marx lifts off from the commodity-form* is not only for purposes of showing that what appears in the market as an equal exchange of things is, in reality, an exploitative relationship of capital to labor at the point of production. It is also, and above all, *to demonstrate that "the fantastic appearance" is true. This is what human relations have become in class society; labor has become reified, made into a thing as if labor were no more than an extension of the machine. Therefore the old must be overthrown, root and branch — its "ideology" (false consciousness) as well as its exploitation.*

Instead of either grasping the link of continuity of today's strivings with that which Marx saw emerging, or *listening* to new voices, today's "Marxists" themselves are the best examples of Marx's concept of ideology as false consciousness. They look upon themselves as "the leaders," or at least the politicians who can offer "a rational reassessment of feminist ideology," and look down upon today's new women rebels as "apolitical," as if politics were the equivalent of a philosophy of liberation. They are insensitive to the distrust the rebels entertain toward them because they cannot conceive that the Women's Liberation Movement has a point when it considers the politicians as no more than still another group that wishes to transform them into mere auxiliaries of *other* movements. Whether they are asked merely to form a "Committee to Support the Socialist Workers Party Candidates," or they are invited "to build a labor party," their disgust is the same. They are sure they are *being used*, when someone like Claire Moriarty rushes to the wrong conclusions that "Just as the 'Negro problem' is, in reality a white problem, chauvinism should be the concern of men."

(3) Marx's now famous *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts, 1844*, have undergone many English translations. I'm quoting my own which appeared as Appendix A in *Marxism and Freedom*.