

THE DETROIT NEWS AND LETTERS COMMITTEE CELEBRATION OF
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY, MARCH 8, 1981 -- a brief summary

Eleven new friends joined the Detroit Committee for the fourth of our series of classes on "Marxist-Humanism: in mass movements; in the battle of ideas" -- which had been turned into a special revolutionary celebration of International Women's Day, 1981. It opened with a reading of the letter to the locals of March 5, which surely reflected the international connections of Marxist-humanism, followed by a brief introduction by Mariana on the historic origins of IWD both in the working women's struggles in the U.S. and the impact those struggles had on the mass women's movement led by Clara Zetkin in Germany. Flanked by the beautiful and creative posters and displays on the past and present IWDs that related Marx's discovery of a whole new continent of thought and revolution to the actual struggles over the past 130 years, Olga began her presentation on:

Women's Liberation and Marxism, From Rosa Luxemburg to Today

Where do we begin this discussion on IWD, 1981 in order to see where we are, and more important where we are going? Two years ago, it was easy -- on IWD 1979 the women of Iran burst forth in their magnificent demonstration against the attempts to stop their revolution. Last year the objective scene was far less inspiring -- the counter-revolution had moved very fast; but we had the great new Fargi pamphlet, "Woman as Reason and as Force of Revolution." This year -- despite the wonderful news that 12,000 women are marching in Rome for abortion rights and against the Vatican -- the objective scene is even worse than last year. But, not only do we have our own new pamphlet of Raya's writings on Women's Liberation, but we have the finished manuscript of the new book. And while it is significant that it took us a year to "catch up to" the Iranian WLists (because the truth is that it is within the fullness of revolution that a philosophy of revolution becomes the most concrete), the greater truth is that these new writings did come first, so the Iranian revolutionaries were able to catch them at a critical point in their revolution. And before the new book, came P&R, and before that M&F, and over all our full 25 Years of Marxist-Humanism in the U.S. That, in fact, is what permits us to look at an objective scene such as we are facing on IWD 1981 and not either go into the doldrums, or become so frustrated at a failure to grow that we begin to look for simplistic targets to blame.

The retrogression we face today is not mere retrogression but outright counter-revolution -- whether that is on the question of abortion rights; or the attack on even so minimal a right as the minimum wage (when over 2/3 of minimum wage earners are women); or something as fantastic as the attack on the theory of Evolution (and if you think that isn't related to the WLM, just read the latest book on Lucy, not only because this oldest specimen of a two-legged human ancestor ever found is a female, but because this discovery may hold a key to humanity's development in terms of when the male (first) became involved in helping gather food for his family, and of how human sexuality evolved to be not just for reproduction.)

It is not, of course, the problems of four million years ago that concern us here today, but 1981 and the onslaught on all human rights we are facing now. And it is a question of where is the WLM in the struggle against Reaganomics and militarization. How could it be that it seems to be nowhere today? -- when, precisely because it came on the objective scene later than the other freedom movements of the 60s, and out of them, it did represent a new force -- that is, it was distinguished from any of the women's movements of the past. Because it did come out of the struggle against the male chauvinism not only of "patriarchal" society in general, but specifically the male chauvinism of the Left itself, it did show an appreciation for theory from its very beginnings. Yet today we are confronted with that terrible gap, not only between philosophy and activity, not

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only between philosophy and organization, but between philosophy and theory. It is exactly the malady that afflicted Rosa Luxemburg. No wonder Raya says she had more to say to our generation than to any before. You would think that she ought to be a favorite of today's theorists. But oh how hard it is to hear new voices, unless you know how to listen.

And that does not mean only how hard it is to hear the new women's voices; or how hard it is for many of those new women to hear the voices from below, of Blacks and workers, men or women. It is even harder to hear the voices that speak in the language of philosophy, which does not mean "abstractions" but the concrete philosophy of revolution as Marx himself articulated it -- Marx's humanism; and as it is being rearticulated for our age by Raya Dunayevskaya -- that is, as Marxist-humanism.

So let's turn back to see where we are coming from -- and Sheila Rowbotham's formulation is absolutely beautiful in Women, Resistance and Revolution when she states bluntly: "There is no beginning of feminism in the sense that there is no beginning to defiance in women." We cannot go back today as far as we could go; but we can begin where Marxism and Freedom begins, with the "Age of Revolutions: Industrial, Social-Political, Intellectual" -- and in particular with the French Revolution. The magnificent creation of democracy by the masses then could not possibly have happened without including the women -- and they were certainly there -- in the streets, and in the clubs. But there was no mass women's movement as such; it took another 40 years before feminism became a movement, during the 1830s with the increasing numbers of women in the factories, and the struggles that went hand in hand with that development.

By 1841 in this country, the Lowell factory women were publishing their own paper called "Factory Girl's Album" and in 1844 the Female Labor Reform Association was born, the first real union of mill workers. We could amass a tremendous number of "facts" like these, but it is not just a collection of facts we need to trace. What we have to see is how it was that those 1840s became an historic world moment. We have to see what it means that 1848 was both the revolutions that covered Europe and the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention in the U.S. We have to see what it means that Flora Tristan's call for an international of working men and women actually predated by a full year Karl Marx's discovery of a whole new continent of thought in his 1844 Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts. And we have to understand why it is that it was that discovery that made this critical period that "world historic moment".

That would have been so even if all the events were unknown to each other. But the real truth is that they did know each other, and not only knew but strengthened each other world-wide. It is not only that someone like Margaret Fuller actually went to Europe and became a participant in the 1848 revolution in Italy. It is that there were actual concrete ties between movements.

Consider how Flora Tristan, the Utopian Socialist, attracted the attention of Pauline Roland and Jeanne Deroin with her moving book called Walks in London; they visited her and talked with her about Tristan's ideas for her Workers' Union, and carried some of those ideas with them into the 1848 Revolutions after Flora Tristan died in 1844. Deroin became one of the writers for the daily feminist paper, La Voix des Femmes, and founded a journal called "Women's Opinion" that called for the "abolition of privileges based on race, birth, money, or sex." But by 1850, with the defeat of the revolutions, Roland and Deroin were thrown into prison for their socialist activities. It was from that prison that they sent their greetings to the Second National Women's Rights Convention -- "Sisters of America! your socialist sisters of France are united with you ... Your courageous declaration has resounded even to our prison, and has filled our souls with inexpressible joy..." And it was back to that prison that the American women sent their greetings, and established a committee to continue

the correspondence.

The internationalism of the women's movement is a fact of life that emerged out of the struggles; and that is true in every one of its stages, including the birth of International Women's Day itself, when Clara Zetkin, in 1911, finally succeeded in having the Second International designate such a day. It was a momentous year in many respects -- the year when even Rosa Luxemburg, who would never before have designated herself that way, wrote to Luise Kautsky: "Are you coming for the women's conference? Just imagine, I have become a feminist! I received a credential for this conference and must therefore go to Jena." It was the year of the tragic Triangle Fire that finally made the U.S. struggles of working women for decent working conditions an international event. Zetkin's call for an International Women's Day was not just to "commemorate" but to continue the struggles.

Nothing better demonstrates the power of internationalism in struggle than the anti-war movement of that period -- and nothing speaks more to us today. It is not only that what helped thrust Rosa Luxemburg to her greatness was her thorough hatred of militarism -- that red thread that ran through her entire life, from her flash of genius in sensing imperialism as early as the Chinese-Japanese War in 1895 right through to her most famous work on Accumulation of Capital, in which she thought she was digging out the roots of imperialism. It is that it was during this long struggle against the impending war that the new revolutionary force of women arose to become the centerpoint of international anti-war activity -- and it was with Rosa Luxemburg that they aligned themselves. Though they have certainly been long hidden from history and philosophy, it was not only the Luxemburgs and the Zetkins, but the great mass of proletarian women who played a crucial role in the German labor movement, especially in the years of war and revolution from 1914 to 1919. It was Gleichheit, whose circulation had reached no less than 125,000 by 1914, that became internationally recognized as the anti-war organ. And the very first demonstration that the spirit of internationalism could not be killed was the international anti-war conference that the women accomplished in the Spring of 1915.

It was a sign of how dangerous the rulers considered this movement, and how determined they were to try to bury the most dangerous revolutionary of all, that Luxemburg was arrested the very evening before she was to leave for Holland with Zetkin for the planning meeting of that international woman's anti-war conference. Her imprisonment (except for 6 short months) did last until she was released by the revolution in November, 1918. So quickly did the counter-revolution move that she was murdered within two months, and the whole revolution was soon beheaded.

And in Russia, where it did succeed -- following one of the most glorious IWDs in history, March 8, 1917, when it was the working women who celebrated by going out on strike and starting the five days that toppled the Tzar -- it has become transformed into opposite. It is only in our age, again, that the void the world has suffered since that transformation, has begun to be filled.

It is not that women's struggles have ceased for one single minute throughout the "void" -- whether we are talking about very particular women's struggles or whether we are talking about their participation in total revolutions. Not a continent has been missed whether it be Africa which saw everything from the Aba Women's War in 1929 to the South African women's struggles against apartheid over the past three full decades, or whether we are talking about China where we have seen everything from Fung Ling's writing of her "Thoughts on March 8" in 1942, or Lin Hsi-ling, the 21 year old student whose voice of revolt, speaking the universal language of human freedom, was raised during the 100 Flowers campaign and whose search for "true socialism" was recorded in Marxism and Freedom. The struggles have continued throughout the world, and throughout the decades.

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But there is something NEW that came onto the world stage in the mid-60s, and became a mass movement in the 70s. It is a stage that has raised altogether new questions, that will not wait for the "day after" to have its demands answered, that refused to be only "objects", that demanded the end to the separation of mental and manual labor, that was unafraid to attack the male chauvinism in the movement of the New Left as well as the Old Left, and refused to consider the relationship of man to woman a "personal" question. It was the something NEW in the movement today that made the founder of Marxist Humanism in this country decide on the new concept -- Women's Liberation as an Idea whose time had, indeed, come -- and the new category she created -- Woman as Reason and Revolutionary Force -- had to be worked out historically.

Working it out historically meant first in terms of the life of Rosa Luxemburg, because she was the only recognized serious revolutionary woman theoretician the socialist movement had produced. It meant second in terms of the WLM today, which has searched for a full decade for a theory for today and yet has not been able to find it. It meant, finally, rooted within the context of the totality of Marx's philosophy of revolution.

In one of the first letters Raya wrote to the Marxist-Humanist Women's Liberationists, on Aug. 9, 1978 -- before she had written a single line of the new book -- she inscribed across the top of the page, as if it were a banner, Rosa Luxemburg's statement: "The revolution is magnificent and everything else is bilge." To those who worried that "others" might take that as "hostility" on RL's part to the "Woman Question," Raya wrote: "It does not mean the downplaying of women. Rather it is the totality she aspires for 'future.' The point is not any counter-position of revolution and woman... I have changed the title of the projected book on Luxemburg's relation to Marx from 'Marx's theory of revolution' to 'Marx's philosophy of revolution' because so long as we only talk of theory, we are talking only of the immediate task of revolution, the overthrow of capitalism. But when we talk of a philosophy of revolution, we mean the creation of a new society. Only when we have that in mind can the revolution be truly total."

The book has seen several "new moments" as it has been created -- the latest of which has been the expansion of the chapter on the WLM as such into a whole Part with three chapters... and it is the final chapter of that part, the one that leads directly into Part III on Marx's Marxism, that is now entitled "The Task That Remains to be Done -- The Unique but Unfinished Contributions of Today's Women's Liberation Movement." (my emphasis)

It is here that we are forced to confront that the two pivotal questions of today (and tomorrow, because there can be no successful revolution without them) are: (1) the totality and the depth of the uprooting that is needed; and (2) the dual rhythm of what Raya calls here both the 'reorganizing of the so-called 'objective' material foundations,' and the 'releasing of the so-called 'subjective' talents' of women and men who will then become whole. It is here that we are confronted with one of the actual revolutions of the past decade -- the Portuguese, and the contradiction between what an Isabel do Carmo and a Maria Barreno seem to represent: Do Carmo, the revolutionary who is not a feminist but who has made a revolutionary contribution around the struggle for apartidarismo (non-partyism); and Barreno, the feminist writer who created a whole new form of literature and who attributed her release from the fascist prison (where she was thrown with her two sister-authors of The Three Marias), not to the revolution, but to the international feminist movement. The point RD makes, (and you will have to read it for yourselves, I would not presume to summarize it here)-- is that both, from two very different directions, faced the crucial question of what form of organization is needed to get freedom in our state-capitalist age.

From whatever direction you come, and whatever part of the book you are in, revolution as total uprooting, and Marx's Marxism as the philosophy for our age -- that is what the book is about. Each age does have only one new philosophy until a new age is born; and "even" an Engels is not Marx. Revolution is what unites Women's Liberation and Marxism. Revolution is what our page in the March issue of N&L is articulating as our celebration of IWD 1981. All else is bilge.

Revolution is what made Marxist-Humanist Women's Liberationists concentrate on three things -- Black, workers, philosophy -- because to separate from Black and workers means you are not going to be able to change society at its roots. To stay separate from a revolutionary organization means to exclude yourselves from the most serious and total work of reorganizing society. What unites Women's Liberation and Marxism -- in the new book because it is so in life -- is the dialectics of liberation in thought and in practice -- what Marx called "history and its process."

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an actual movement, whether that is something like the Silonian Weavers uprising in Marx's time, or the Women's Liberation Movement of our own, it illuminates a whole new moment in history... It was the WLM that helped Raya see something new in Marx's philosophy of revolution itself. But what made it possible was the unique relationship with Marx's Marxism in which she had been grounded to begin with. That is what the whole 25 year history demonstrates, and what it has to show us of "method" and of revolution. You can trace it from our very founding when women were singled out in our Constitution as one of the four forces of the American revolution. You can follow it through the 60s when we singled out the South African women's struggles against apartheid, found Woman Power Unlimited during the Freedom Rides to Mississippi, saw the In Memoriam to Natalia Trotsky transformed into the whole question of "Women in Revolution", put Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman on the cover of ACOT, and on and on.

This is not a question of trying to annotate all the references to women to prove a case, anymore than tracing Marx's revolutionary attitude to Man/Woman is a matter of trying to annotate him. In Women, Resistance and Revolution, Sheila Rowbotham put the whole question upside down when she agreed with Juliet Mitchell that "the liberation of women has remained marginal in Marxist theory -- dependent on the emancipation of the working class... Many crucial questions are unanswered, and will not be resolved by annotating his writings specifically on women, but by extending Marxist theory in general as part of revolutionary feminist praxis." But Marx's theory is not part of revolutionary feminist praxis. It is the other way around. Revolutionary feminist praxis is part and parcel of Marx's Marxism, and no part can be torn out of that profound philosophy of revolution without killing it. The new book is, indeed, a totality, not three separate parts. And "realizing" the continuity of Marx's philosophy for our age is, indeed, the task that remains to be done.

IN THE DISCUSSION, Miriam raised the centrality of women to the WWII anti-war movement as flying in the face of the chauvinism of the Anti-Vietnam War movement that dismissed "women's issues"; not seeing that women saw anti-militarism as central to a new society. Andy spoke on the way others dismiss Luxemburg as a feminist, in relation to the crucial importance for us to see the unity of the three elements in the new book's title, noting that the objectivity of women trying to create a new society is in contradiction to the counter-revolutionary thrusts we witness today. Suzanne spoke on the Sexual Harassment Workshop she had attended that weekend, where the conception of women's liberation as meaning being for the liberation of all people came out clearly; and raised the quandry of seeing women as a prime target of Reagan's cuts and yet not having any significant protest from the WLM. Susan raised the question of how the discussion today could strengthen

our involvement in current activities, such as Take Back the Night planning meetings, and Jim spoke of the idea of philosophy being worked out within the fullness of revolution, and how that related to the Latin American revolutions.

Mike stressed the new illumination you gain from rereading the articles by RD over the past decade, and the way the new conception of woman as reason and revolutionary force that was the title of her very first article in NOWL has now been worked out historically back to RL and Marx; the 1978 letter referred to today demonstrates, again, how RD in relating revolution to WL transformed the stress in the book, from theory, to Marx's philosophy of revolution. Eugene spoke of the need to examine the terms "revolutionary" and "feminist" both in a new way. And Mary said she was struck most by the chapter title: The Task That Remains to be Done -- the Unique but Unfinished Contributions of Today's WIM, which points a direction for the whole WIM, not just those in this room. While most of the left has been forced to recognize the force of WL by now, they do not know the fullness of the subject of woman; we hear only about the "objective" reorganization of society, nothing of the "subjective" release that Marxist-Humanism sees in revolutionary creation of a new society.

Raya began by noting that Reagan is trying to retrogress even within the structure of capitalism, acting as if the days that brought on everything from the Great Depression and World War II and the Holocaust are so glorious that we must return to them. Yet this is where dialectic methodology comes in -- we have to look for the absolute opposite to what seems to be apparent. Thus, at the height of the counter-revolution after the 1905 Revolution, we find the very first Women's Council or Anjumi in the world, created in Persia -- yet nobody knew about it until our own period. A new revolutionary force arises even though it isn't recognized. Our task is not to get pessimistic, but to see what is new, on which we can build. There has never been a revolution that has not brought out a new force, but we have to recognize how long it takes before such a new force appears. Raya took her experience with the Black working women during WWII to show that though nobody was more advanced at that point than Simone de Beauvoir, she nevertheless accepted the idea of women as a "Second Sex", while the Black women, some of whom may have been illiterate, were raising the critical questions about the nature of society and criticizing De Beauvoir for not even knowing that nobody will give you your freedom, you have to fight for it.

...The two words that are critical are Reason and Revolution -- and what we are trying to answer is why all the great revolutions we have seen did not gel as Reason until today. Luxemburg was both a great revolutionary and a feminist -- though she kept the two separated. But if you see a new revolutionary force like the women only as force, and not as Reason too, you are not going to have the new... The word Marx used for his conception of revolution, Raya continued, was "continuous," permanent and continuous. Today we can see the urgent need to connect theory and practice in order to have "revolution in permanence." Youth have also emerged as revolutionary force in our period, but if we think they have disappeared today because we don't have the mass demonstrations of the 60s, it means we once more are seeing them only as "force" and not as Reason. And, of course, the Black dimension has been the greatest, both as force and as Reason, throughout all of American History...

The point, Raya re-emphasized, is to see philosophy not as an abstraction, but as action. Without that concept, without seeing both force and Reason, we will have only pessimism about the counter-revolution. With that concept, we will be able to find the absolute opposite to Reaganism, and build on that.

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The meeting was adjourned to set up tables for the Pot-Luck dinner which provided a wide variety of delicious food to go along with the "food for thought", as discussion continued over the repast.

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