

Returning to Rosa Luxemburg: A Comment on Raya Dunayevskaya's Concept of the Masses as Revolutionary Subject

A Chinese Intellectual

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In her books, Raya Dunayevskaya saw in the masses the spontaneity and self-movement of the revolutionary subject. In her 1958 *Marxism and Freedom*, she discussed the differences in this regard between Karl Marx and the radical intellectuals Ferdinand Lassalle and Pierre Proudhon. In my view, this constituted a discussion in the abstract. In her 1973 *Philosophy and Revolution*, she saw the masses' struggles as movements of liberation by rank-and-file workers, women, the Black dimension, and youth. In my opinion, this was a discussion in the concrete.

Precisely because the masses embody spontaneity and self-movement, nobody, and especially not the intelligentsia, should think and plan *for* them. Because the masses embody spontaneity and self-movement, the total crisis in history can be resolved only by hearing the voices from the masses. Dunayevskaya conceived of these voices as new passions and new forces to open a fresh beginning in history. Both Dunayevskaya and Rosa Luxemburg embraced the concept of the masses as revolutionary subject.

In *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions*, Luxemburg expressed her idea of spontaneity as follows: "The element of spontaneity, as we have seen, plays a great part in all Russian mass strikes without exception, be it as a driving force or as restraining influence.... In short, in the mass strike in Russia the element of spontaneity plays such a predominant part, not because the Russian proletariat are 'uneducated,' but because revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them." (1) Far from seeing the masses as "uneducated" or "immature," Luxemburg saw them as important forces in the revolutionary movement.

Raya Dunayevskaya similarly criticized Lassalle and Proudhon in her *Marxism and Freedom* as follows: "Lassalle was the living proof that within the revolutionary

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movement itself the radical intellectual solution waits to strangle the theoretician who is blind to the creative energies of the masses.” (2) In *Philosophy and Revolution*, she extended these kinds of critiques to Leon Trotsky and to Jean-Paul Sartre. Dunayevskaya summed up the intellectual’s plan for the workers as follows:

“The radical intellectuals were forever planning to do something ‘for’ the worker, substituting their activity, or at least planning, for the self-activity of the working class. At one point in history, following the French Revolution, this type of planning had the heroic proportions of Babeuf’s ‘Conspiracy of the Equals.’ By the 1840s it had the pathetic shape of Proudhon’s ‘organization of exchange’ while in the actual revolution of 1848 it had the anti-revolutionary stamp of Lamartine’s joining ‘to harness the storm.’ Whatever the forms they plan — and they will be myriad as we progress to our age — the radical intellectuals are blind to the creative energies of the masses. In opposing them and keeping his eyes glued instead to the activity of the masses, Marx was able to generalize their creative activities into a theory of liberation...” (3)

Dunayevskaya highlighted the distinction between the intellectual’s plan and the activity of the masses. Her consideration of alternatives to the proletarian revolution put me in mind of Rosa Luxemburg’s criticism of the Russian Revolution of 1905: “If it depended on the inflammatory ‘propaganda’ of revolutionary romanticists or public decisions of the party direction, then we should not even yet have had in Russia a single serious mass strike.” (4)

Dunayevskaya similarly refused to view the masses as immature. On the contrary, their spontaneity and self-movement made them know their goal and how to achieve it. She often asked the question: “What happened after the revolution?” She took this question very seriously. Did the masses achieve their freedom? If not, who benefited instead? Of course, it was those who had made the plans. So great alternatives and their makers! So the great Vanguard Party! So the great “proletarian dictatorship!” A new ruling class! Whether the newly established state was called a “workers’ state” or “socialism,” it did not achieve a humanistic society. Not did it bring freedom to the masses of the working class. They remained oppressed and exploited.

For Dunayevskaya, this was the case in the Soviet Union. In her *Philosophy and Revolution*, she leveled a sharp critique: “Petty-bourgeois subjectivism has always ended by holding on to some state power, and never more than in our state-capitalist age, whose intellectuals are so ridden through with the administrative mentality of the Plan, the Vanguard Party, the ‘cultural’ revolution and the substitute for the revolution.” (5)

In my opinion, if proletarian class consciousness is engrafted from outside sources such as the intellectuals, the party, or the revolutionary romanticists, it is possible that these outside forces would themselves become another force alienated from the working class. Who can be sure that they will never retrogress after they have fulfilled their plan for the workers? Only the masses can think and plan for themselves. Only the workers who indeed have encountered alienation and reification in the process of production can thoroughly and successfully overcome alienation and reification. For Dunayevskaya, only Marx's concept of "freely associated labor" would lead to the full, free development of the working class.

In this sense, both Rosa Luxemburg and Raya Dunayevskaya did listen to the voices of the masses and did take the masses as not only the revolutionary subject to uproot capitalist society but also to create a new social order. As Dunayevskaya put it in *Philosophy and Revolution*, "The totality of the crisis demands not only listening to the voices from below, but also building on that foundation as the reality and as the link to historic continuity."
(6)

In the spontaneity and self-movement of mass struggle, one is left with only revolutionary blueprints from outside the working class without the ceaseless fight for the freedom of human beings. Surely the intellectuals will feel depressed when their blueprints are defeated in history. This was true of Sartre's play, *No Exit*. Instead, Marx, Luxemburg, and Lenin threw themselves into the revolutionary struggle, as did Raya Dunayevskaya.

The intellectual in our age, however, only stays in an ivory tower of utopian illusion. After 1968, Western Marxism was upended by postmodernism and was forced toward so-called "post-Marxism." Some continued to work on leftist plans or strategies. Some gave up their antagonism to capitalism. In China, however, the masses continued their incessant struggle.

Notes

1. Peter Hudis and Kevin Anderson, eds., *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004, p. 198.
2. Raya Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, p.77.
3. Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom*, pp. 73-74.
4. Rosa Luxemburg Reader, p. 170.
5. Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, p.289.
6. Ibid.

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