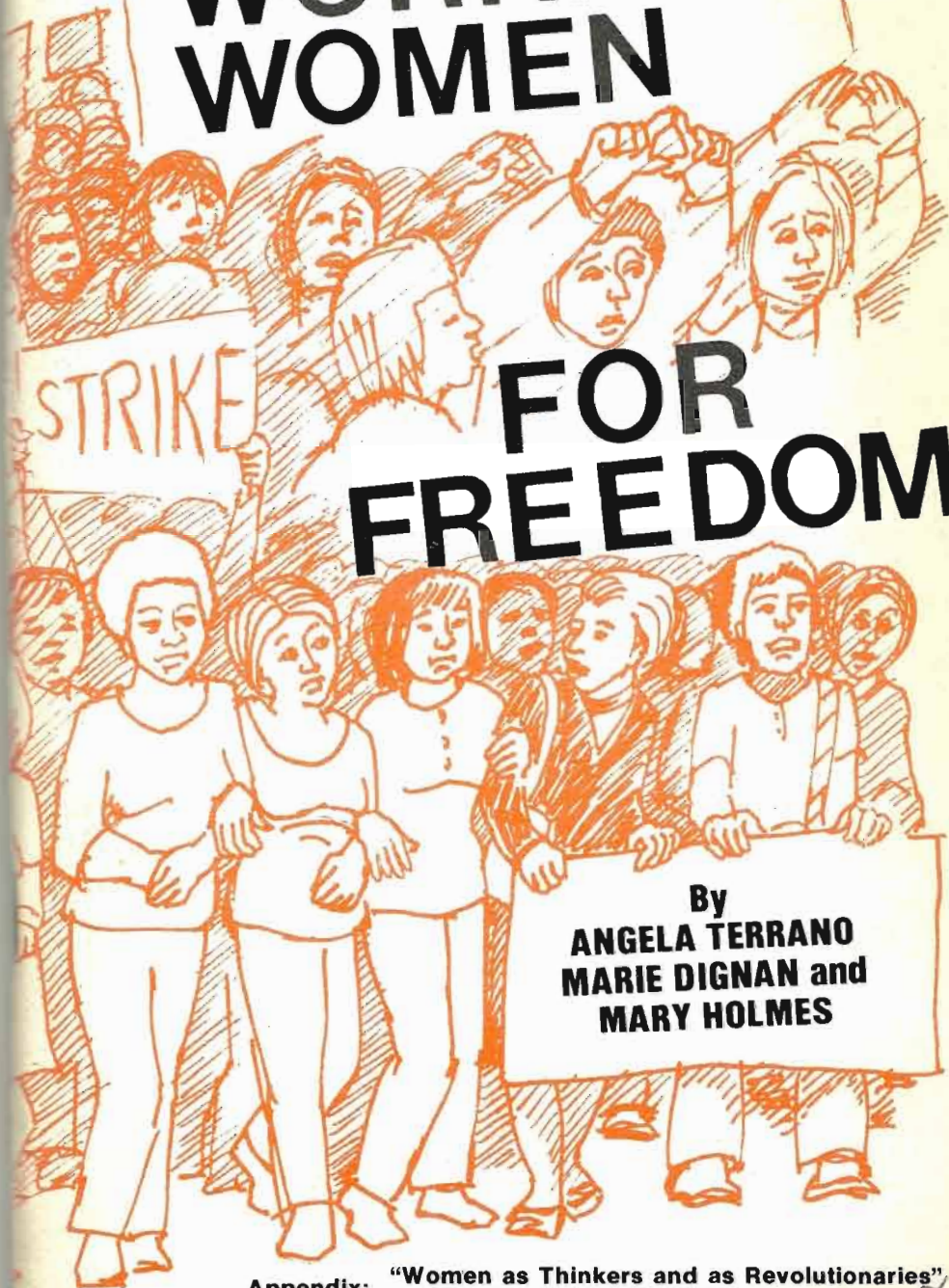


WORKING WOMEN

FOR FREEDOM

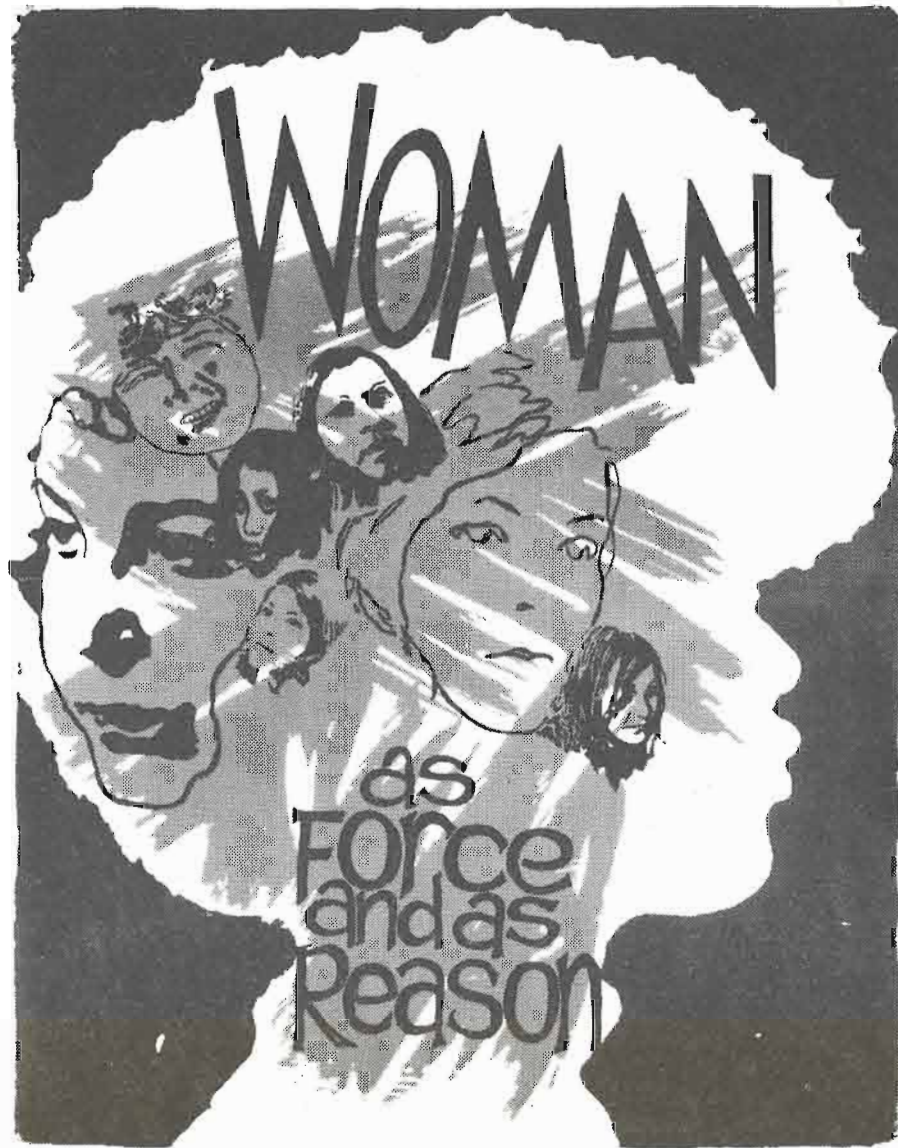


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Appendix: "Women as Thinkers and as Revolutionaries"
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WOMEN AS THINKERS AND AS REVOLUTIONARIES

by Raya Dunayevskaya

(The article below is excerpted from two lectures: "Today's Women Theorists," given in Detroit, at the WSU-U of M Cultural Center, Sept. 1975; and "Rosa Luxemburg," given at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, May 1976.)

Good evening. Let's go adventuring, first in women's activities that have not been recognized as revolutions, such as the first Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Fall, N.Y., in 1848, and the Aba "riots" in Nigeria, 1929, and then take the plunge into three revolutions: Russia, February 1917; Germany, January 1919; and the ongoing revolution in Portugal now. In each case we will become a witness to women's creativity as a liberating force.

I. Mass Creativity and the Black Dimension

Creativity is so very characteristic of masses in motion, that you tell a story of the past and have it sound like something just happening before your eyes. Or you can describe a happening of today, and have it sound as something that will first happen tomorrow. The temptation is also great to start the story of women's creativity neither at its beginning, nor at the end, that is, today, but somewhere in the middle. This is not due to any sort of Existentialist obsession with "extreme situations." Rather it is rooted in the truth that women's struggles have created totally new situations, hidden from history and still unrecognized as philosophic ground. What today we call Women's Liberation as an Idea whose time has come, are movements from practice, from below, that have been accumulating through the ages.

Take the so-called Aba "riots" in Eastern Nigeria in 1929, some 30 years before anyone thought seriously of Africa, much less African women, as a new development of world freedom. It was in that inauspicious year that the market women in Eastern Nigeria were suddenly taxed by the occupying British Empire. This was done with the consent of the African chiefs. The anger of the women, however, was unbounded and therefore, though the men, the educated ones, would not help the illiterate women resist the imposition of the tax, the women decided, themselves, to revolt.

The self-organization of the women established a totally new form of struggle which transcended all tribal divisions — Ibo, Yoruba, Hausa, as well as the smaller tribes. So united, powerful, and violent was the opposition of the women to the edicts, to their own chiefs, as well as to the British imperial rule, that it became impossible to contain the revolt. Shots were fired into the crowd, and only when 40 women lay dead and many more injured, was so-called "order" restored. Even then, however, it was achieved only after the tax was revoked, with British rulers claiming that they had been unaware of African "traditions" that the women not be taxed.

The attitude towards women's struggles seems always to play down women's actions as not meriting the description "revolutionary." For that matter, even up to our day, has any historian, or even revolutionary, seen that historic act as ground from which a great leap into freedom as well as leadership was achieved in the 1960s? Nor can the neglect be explained only by the fact that the event occurred in far-off Africa, back at the outbreak of the Great Depression.

Take the Women's Rights Convention in this country in 1848, at Seneca Falls, N.Y., a fact often enough recorded by women historians of today. All underestimate the Black dimension which inspired the white, middle-class, educated women to strike out on their own. Sojourner Truth and sometimes also Harriet Tubman are dutifully mentioned, condescendingly admitting their bravery — and of course their suffering as slaves — but never as Reason which drove the educated to face reality: that the Black women were the orators, generals, and, yes, thinkers, whereas they, the middle-class intellectuals, were but subordinates.

For that matter, have we asked ourselves, as we proudly repeat Women's Liberation is an Idea whose time has come, such simple questions, as: (1) How does it happen that our very names, "freed from patriarchy," do not measure up to Sojourner Truth's, whose whole philosophy of liberation is included in her name? (2) Have we even today, as we inveigh against "male domination," compared it to Sojourner Truth's separation from Frederick Douglass after the Civil War for being "short-minded" because he did not wish to burden the struggle for passage of the 14th Amendment by demanding also the right of women to vote? And (3) have today's women theorists built on that movement from below, not only as force, but as Reason? Nor have any analyzed it within the context of that year of revolutions, 1848.

Let's take a second look at that year, 1848. Was the first Women's Rights Convention really totally unrelated to the revolutions that covered the length and breadth of Europe? Isn't it a fact, though hardly recorded, that the women of the French Revolution of that year published a daily paper, **La Voix des Femmes** (which is something the women of today have yet to create)?

Other than Marx's genius, what **was** in the air that led to Marx's discovery of a whole new continent of thought? Can we today afford to let the ruling ideology keep us hemmed into American pragmatism? Shouldn't we, as women, at least be aware of the fact that the year Marx first broke with bourgeois society and worked out a philosophy of liberation which he called "a new Humanism" — 1843 — was also the year when a woman, Flora Tristan, proclaimed the need for an international of men and women that would put an end to the division of mental and manual labor?

Young Flora Tristan died that year in the London plague. In Germany, the young Marx continued to develop a whole body of works, a theory of proletarian revolution, a whole philosophy of human liberation, deeply rooted both in the class struggles **and** in that most fundamental relationship, Man/Woman. Marx helped organize women's movements, not only for better wages, but totally different conditions of labor; not only for the right to vote, but for full freedom. Eighty full pages on women and child labor went into **Capital**, Vol. I, not only as description and resistance, but, as Marx expressed it when he drew the whole work to a conclusion, "the new passions and new forces" that would produce the "negation of the negation," that is to say, become the "grave diggers" of capitalism, creating a whole new society where "the development of human power is its own end."

Some 100 years after Flora Tristan's declaration for an international organization of working men and women; after Marx's discovery of a whole new continent of thought; after the first Women's Rights Convention, in New York; and after the greatest revolution in Marx's lifetime — the Paris Commune — in which **The Women Incendiaries**¹ surely acted as both force and Reason, isn't it time to work out a philosophy so urgently needed by the Women's Liberation Movement which does not, **does not**, limit the question of women's liberation to an expose of "the Man" and thereby becomes practically no more than a bystander to Marx's philosophy of liberation on the excuse that it is "male defined,"² as Sheila Rowbotham puts it.

Marx practiced what he preached, again both in the class struggle, and on the question of women as Reason as well as force. Thus, in the Workingmen's International Association, Madame Law was a member of its leadership, the General Council. Thus, he encouraged Dmitrieva to go to Paris and there establish the women's section of the First International. Along with the French women like the great Louise Michel, Dmitrieva became central to the whole Committee for the Defense of Paris and Care of the Wounded in the Paris Commune. There was no break in Marx's philosophy of liberation from the time the young Marx called his philosophy a "new Humanism," and declared Man/Woman to be the most fundamental human relationship, to the Marx of the Paris Commune when he declared the greatest achievement to be "its own working existence."

Or course, Marx answered the questions of his day, not ours, but can we afford, as women's liberationists of today, to be without a total philosophy, because the greatest philosophy for uprooting the exploitative old and creating ground for the new was formulated by "a man"?

II. Russia, February 1917; Germany, January 1919; and Rosa Luxemburg

Now let's turn to the 20th century and see, firstly, what we can learn from women **as masses in motion**, initiating nothing short of the overthrow of that reactionary Russian colossus, Tsarism — the dramatic, creative, empire-shaking five days in February, 1917; and, secondly, let's turn to the 1919 German Revolution, and its greatest theoretician, Rosa Luxemburg.

That first day, Feb. 23, in Russia, appeared simple enough as a celebration of International Women's Day by the textile workers in Petrograd. But was it that simple, when they insisted it become a strike, despite a raging world war in which their country was doing very badly? Was it that simple when all revolutionary parties — Bolsheviks, Left Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries, Anarchists — were telling them that they were courting a massacre, and they shouldn't go out on strike? Was that first day of the revolution, when 50,000 women marched despite all advice against it, a "male-defined" revolution? Was the letter they addressed to the metal workers, which the metal workers honored by joining the strike — and 50,000 grew to 90,000: men and women, housewives as well as factory workers — a proof of the fact that they didn't really "know" what they were doing?

When the Bolsheviks did join the women textile workers and the strike turned

1. See **The Women Incendiaries** by Edith Thomas. This work on the women in the Paris Commune is a must for all women's liberationists. It is the most detailed and creative analysis of the revolution of 1871.

2. Sheila Rowbotham, **Women, Resistance and Revolution**, p. 11.



Rosa
Luxemburg

into political opposition to the imperialist war and the Cossacks did open fire, it was too late to save the Russian empire. By then the soldiers also joined the masses in revolt, and "spontaneously" the whole rotten empire toppled.

It is true that those five historic days that crumbled the might of Tsarism led, in turn, to the Revolution of Oct. 25, and that certainly was led by the Bolshevik Party. That, however, can no more detract from what the women workers initiated on Feb. 23, than the October one can be blamed for its transformation into opposite under Stalin a decade later.

What had happened in action, what had happened in thought, what had happened in consciousness of the mass participants — all this is ground on which we build today. Or should be. But even if some still insist on playing down women **both** as masses in motion and as leadership, let them consider the German Revolution, January, 1919, led by Rosa Luxemburg. None questioned that she was the leader.



From 1899 when she fought the first appearance of reformism in the Marxist movement; through the 1905 Revolution in which she was both a participant and out of which she drew her famous theory of the Mass Strike; from 1910-13 when she broke with Karl Kautsky — four years in advance of Lenin's designation of Kautsky as not only opportunist but betrayer of the proletariat — and when she first developed her anti-imperialist struggles and writings, not only as political militant but carving out her greatest and most original theoretical work, **Accumulation of Capital**; to the 1919 Revolution, she made no division between her theory and her practice.

Take her **Reform or Revolution?** against Bernstein, who demanded that "the dialectical scaffolding" be removed from Marx's "materialism."

"When he," she is talking of Bernstein, "directs his keenest arrows against our dialectical system, he is really attacking the specific mode of thought employed by the conscious proletariat in its struggle for liberation . . . It is an attempt to

shatter the intellectual arm with the aid of which the proletariat, while materially under the yoke of the bourgeoisie, is yet enabled to triumph over the bourgeoisie. For it is our dialectical system that shows the working class the transitory character of its yoke, proving to the workers the inevitability of their victory, and has already realized the revolution in the domain of thought."

The next great historic event — the Russian Revolution of 1905 — again reveals her as theorist and activist participant who did not stop at oratory but, with gun in hand, made the proprietor-printer print a workers' leaflet. What she singled out, however, from the great experience; what she made ground for other revolutions; what she created as a theory also for the relationship of spontaneity to party, was **The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions:**

"The revolution is not an open-field maneuver of the proletariat, even if the proletariat with social democracy at its head plays the leading role, but it is a struggle in the middle of incessant movement, the creaking, crumbling and displacement of all social foundations. In short, the element of spontaneity plays such a supreme role in the mass strikes in Russia, not because the Russian proletariat is 'unschooled,' but because revolutions are not subject to schoolmastering."

It is this concept and this activity and this perspective that led, in 1907, to Luxemburg's joining with Lenin and Trotsky to amend the resolution at the Stuttgart meeting of the International that declared socialist opposition to war and the imperative need to transform it into revolution.

At the time when Luxemburg recognized the non-revolutionary character of Karl Kautsky, when all other Marxists, Lenin included, were still acknowledging him as the greatest theoretician of the Second International, she embarked on the most hectic point of activity outside of a revolution itself.

She felt very strongly that the German Social Democracy had been hardly more than a bystander instead of militant fighter against Germany's imperialist adventures. It was this, and not mere "organizational" questions, which made her return to her original analysis of mass strike which had always meant to her that "the masses will be the active chorus, and the leaders only 'speaking parts,' the interpreters of the will of the masses."

Luxemburg was not only involved in lecturing and developing an anti-imperialist struggle over the Morocco crisis which would, in turn, lead to her greatest theoretical work, **Accumulation of Capital**³, but she also turned to work on the woman question,⁴ which heretofore she had left entirely to Clara Zetkin, who was editing the greatest German women's magazine, **Die Gleichheit**, from 1891 to 1917.

The magazine's circulation rose from 9,500 in 1903 to 112,000 in 1913. Indeed, by the outbreak of the war, the female membership in the German Social Democracy was no less than 170,000. It is clear that, as great a theoretician as Rosa Luxemburg was, and as great an organizer as Clara Zetkin was, they were not exceptions to the alleged apathy of German women. On the contrary, it would be more correct to say that there wouldn't have been as massive and important a revolution in Germany were

3. I happen to disagree seriously with her theory in **Accumulation of Capital**, because I consider it a deviation from Marx. This cannot however detract from the important contribution it made in the struggle against imperialism in her day. See "State-Capitalism and Marx's Humanism or Philosophy and Revolution," (News and Letters, 1967.)

4. See Rosa Luxemburg's speech on "Women's Suffrage and Class Struggle" at the Stuttgart Second Social Democratic Women's Rally, May 12, 1912, included in **Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg** (Monthly Review, N.Y.).

there not that many women involved in the revolution. Naturally none could compare with Rosa Luxemburg as theoretician. That is certainly true of genius whether that be woman or man. As one of the very few persons who had written on the subject put it, were it not for proletarian women, "there might have been no revolution in Germany."⁵

Despite all the misrepresentation of her position on the Russian Revolution, she had hailed it as the greatest proletarian revolution ever, insisting that the Russian Bolsheviks alone had dared and dared again. It was exactly for such a daring act that she was preparing herself from her jail cell, from which she was not freed until Nov. 9, 1918, when the German masses in revolt had driven the Kaiser from the throne. Anyone who tried to use her criticism of the Russian Revolution as the German Revolution unfolded got from her the following: where did you learn the ABC's of revolution? Is it not from the Russians? Who taught you the slogan, "all power to the soldiers, workers, and peasants"? Isn't it the Russians? This is the dialectics of revolution: that is what Spartakus wants, this is the road we are taking now.

Rosa Luxemburg lived only two and a half months after being let out of jail. Two and a half months in which the upsurge of the masses led to the establishment first of the Spartakus League and then the independent Communist Party in Germany. Two and a half months in which to call for all power to the soldiers' and workers' councils. And then the counter-revolution caught up with her, shot her, bashed in her head, and threw her body into the Landwehr Canal.

Does the beheading of the German Revolution — Liebknecht and Jogiches were murdered along with Luxemburg — mean that we're not to learn from a revolution because it was "unsuccessful"?

Has the Women's Liberation Movement nothing to learn from Rosa Luxemburg just because she hasn't written "directly" on the "Woman Question"? Outside the fact that the latter doesn't happen to be true, should not the corpus of her works become the real test of woman as revolutionary and as thinker and as someone who has a great deal to tell us as women's liberationists of today? Are we to throw all that into the dustbin of history because she had not written on the "Woman Question"?

III. An Ongoing Revolution and Today's Women Theorists

The plunge into revolutions is being undertaken because they not only are exciting events of the early 20th century, but will also illuminate the problems of our day. We need to examine, if only briefly, today's ongoing Portuguese Revolution to see the historic continuity of working class women in motion as shapers of history. As far back as two decades ago, when the totally new movement from below began with the outbreak of the East European revolt against Russian totalitarianism, signaling a new world stage of struggle for freedom from under totalitarianism, and no one was paying attention to the fascist regime in Portugal, there were struggles of workers, of women, of peasants.

The first woman to die in Portugal, in the mid-1950s, in the fight for the eight-

5. A good beginning on this subject has been made by William A. Peltz in his unpublished thesis, "The Role of Proletarian Women in the German Revolution, 1918-19," presented at the Conference on the History of Women, College of St. Catherine, St. Paul, Minn., Oct. 24-25, 1975.

hour day was Caterina Eufemia. It is she who was to become the symbol for the women's movement — MDM — that was organized in the underground. For that matter, she became also the symbol for the struggle for women's rights of the new MLM, which was organized by intellectuals and middle-class women, when the "Three Marias"⁶ were freed from jail.

The undercurrents of revolt had actually been germinating long before 1974. When no others were paying attention to Portugal as the youth rebellion around the world reached a high point in 1968, there was, in fact, an outbreak of revolts in Portugal by students who were fighting not only for academic freedom, but against being drafted for the Portuguese imperialist wars in Africa. The two high points that were reached in all these undercurrents of revolt came from within the army in Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and Angola,⁷ and from within Portugal itself.

Within the country itself there was a whole series of wildcats in 1973. Women became especially important in 1973 when a labor shortage sent them into textiles and electronics, and directly into the fight against multinationals. It is in textiles and electronics and shipyards where the grass roots workers' movement first erupted, and where none questioned the militancy of women workers. But they were asking not only for a fundamental change in labor conditions, but for different relations at home, as well as raising totally new questions of revolution and new human relations.

With the overthrow of the fascist Caetano regime in April 1974, there were outbreaks of all sorts of wildcats, freeing the revolution itself from the neo-fascist "leadership" of Spínola, and creating the foundation also of a new Women's Liberation Movement. Women's participation became critical as three movements — the rebellion within the army, and the wildcats of industrial workers covering the length and breadth of the country, as well as the peasant occupation of the land — coalesced. It was no accident that one of the revolutionary political movements that arose, PRP/BR, was headed by a woman, Isabel do Carmo.

As can be seen, the question of revolutionary creativity is not just that of an individual, not even when she's as great as Rosa Luxemburg, and certainly not that of artists or scientists. Now then, let us see whether the movement from practice was the stuff out of which the women theorists of today, whether they be in the U.S., England, or any other technologically advanced country, built their theories.

With the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement in the mid-1960s, when a whole new generation of revolutionaries was born out of the Black Revolution, the anti-Vietnam war movement, and the world-wide national liberation struggles, we had the rise also of women theorists. The new in the struggles of the mid-1960s, when it came to the Women's Liberation Movement, was the women's refusal to wait for the day **after** "the Revolution" for **their** total freedom. They refused to narrow their struggles to fight for equal wages or, for that matter, any other economic demands. They raised all sorts of new questions, from sexuality to opposition both to patriarchy and the ingrained division between mental and manual labor. For what they aspired to was nothing short of the wholeness of the person.

6. The original title of the work for which Maria Isabel Barrero, Maria Teresa Horta, and Maria Velho da Costa were imprisoned was **New Portuguese Letters**, published in 1972.

7. The leaflets of the FRELIMO in Mozambique, the PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau, and MPLA in Angola may not match the fraternization leaflets that the Bolsheviks wrote in 1917, but they certainly were an entirely new ground for fighting in Portugal, 1974. In urging the Portuguese soldiers to go home and make their own revolution, the national liberation forces were raising questions, including the role of women, that the "advanced" Portuguese had not even heard of. See **The Struggle for Mozambique** by Eduardo Mondlane and **Return to the Source** by Amílcar Gabriel.

The women theorists have done considerable work in exposing male chauvinism in history, and in the Movement itself. It was certainly of the essence to make such relatively undiscussable subjects as sexuality discussable, not à la Freud, but against Freud. Works like Kate Millet's **Sexual Politics** exposed the male chauvinism of great writers of our day, from D. H. Lawrence to Norman Mailer. Others took issue with all forms of patriarchy. The weak point was that none of them were in any serious way related to working class women, their activities, their thoughts, their aspirations. The one exception was Sheila Rowbotham's **Women, Resistance and Revolution**.

In dealing with 300 years of women's struggles, in concentrating on labor struggles and revolutions, and openly espousing socialism, and in bringing in the question of male chauvinism not as something only capitalistic, but very much pervasive within the Movement itself, she focused on the validity of an independent women's movement. Unfortunately, so preoccupied was she with "the new" that she neither dug deeply into philosophic roots, nor so much as mentioned one of the greatest revolutionary theoreticians, Rosa Luxemburg. Whatever the reason — whether it was because Rosa didn't write voluminously on the "Woman Question," or Rosa Luxemburg's works and activities are not, to her mind, relevant to today's women's tasks, or whatever — she thereby actually degraded women's revolutionary role. Indeed, flying in the face of history, she writes as if all revolutions were "male-defined." This only leads her to a vanguardist conclusion that women, even when doing nothing short of initiating a great revolution that toppled Tsarism, lacked "consciousness." That is still one other form of considering women "backward." In a word, no matter how "consciously" one favors an independent women's movement, one doesn't really consider them capable of "getting there" — unless led by a "Vanguard Party." Vanguardism, elitism cannot but impede the Women's Liberation Movement of today from working out a new relationship of spontaneity to organization, theory to practice, philosophy to revolution. It is but one more form of separating thinking from doing, especially as it relates to women as thinkers and as revolutionaries.

Working class women have a very special reason for their passionate interest in revolutions, not simply because they're exciting events, but because they show working class women in motion as shapers of history. The dialectical relationship of spontaneity to organization is of the essence to all of us as we face today's crises. It is not only Portugal which is under the whip of counter-revolution that began Nov. 25, 1975. The global struggle for power between capitalist imperialism and state-capitalist societies calling themselves Communist, all nuclearly armed, has put a question mark over the very survival of humanity.

Creativity that can really tear things up at their roots and genuinely start something new, humanly new, can only come from mass creativity. It is only then when it is totally revolutionary, is not hemmed in by the concept and practice of the "Party to lead," and it is only then it can once and for all end aborted and unfinished revolutions.

Be it something as "simple" as the question of women's struggle for equality in the very midst of all the myriad crises, or the deep recession and racism in the U.S., what women are hungering for is working out the relationship of their creativity to a philosophy of liberation. We surely do not need yet one more form of elitism. What we do need is a **unity** of philosophy and revolution. Without it, we will not be able to get out from under the whip of the counter-revolution.