

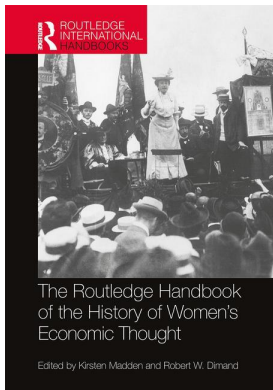
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The point is to change it

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10

THE POINT IS TO *CHANGE* IT

Three lives of applied Marxism

Zoe Sherman

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it.

Karl Marx, Theses on Feuerbach

Introduction

Eleanor Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, and Raya Dunayevskaya all spent their lives immersed in Marxist theory and political action. They all found the worlds they were born into worthy of their efforts but wanting. Marxism was for all of them a theory of the process of change and therefore a practical tool for participating in the practice of making change. This chapter highlights areas of their practice that clearly expressed the theoretical understanding they derived from Marx—and their practice and experience, in turn, shaped their choice and interpretation of theory.

Eleanor Marx, youngest daughter of the famous Karl and his wife Jenny, was born in England in 1855. She was most politically active in England from the 1880s until her death in 1898 (Kapp 1976; Holmes 2014). Rosa Luxemburg was born into a Jewish family in Russian-occupied Poland in 1871 and was most active in Germany and Poland from the mid-1890s until she was assassinated in 1919 (Nettl 1969; Ettinger 1986). Raya Dunayevskaya was born in Ukraine in 1910—she then immigrated to the U.S. with her family as a child. Her long career, mostly centered in the U.S., spanned the middle of the twentieth century, from the mid-1930s to her death in 1987 (Howard and King 2000). Despite important differences in these contexts, the three all lived in times and places where capitalist development was yielding remarkable technological advances and increases in the production of goods. But they could not see this development as a pure triumph of human progress. They were keenly aware of the unequal distribution of productive work and the unequal distribution of economic rewards. They viewed the dire poverty that persisted in their home countries and the subjugation of far-off populations by their home countries' colonial occupations as core features of capitalism. They agreed with K. Marx's assessment that capitalism is inherently exploitative and alienating: workers' labor produces value that is appropriated by capitalists. With this exploitative relationship at the core of economic production, all human relations are damaged.

They devoted themselves, therefore, to the struggle to remake the economy, and the whole social world, in line with participatory democracy and non-exploitative values. To those fearful that the socialist criticism of private property meant socialists wanted to strip everyone of their personal belongings, Eleanor Marx explained that the goal was quite the contrary: those who now have nothing would, far from being denied belongings, for the first time be able to say “my coat,” “my watch.” But, she continued, no one would be able to say “my factory” or “my land” and certainly no one would be able to say about another person’s body “my hands” (Kapp 1976, p. 138). The vision of how to practice democratic, non-exploitative values evolved. The public ownership of factories and land that E. Marx favored in the 1880s, for example, was not convincing to Dunayevskaya in 1940. Rather than abolishing the capitalist–worker divide, Dunayevskaya argued, the state takeover of factories in Soviet Russia incorporated the role of a capitalist into the activities of the state (Howard and King 2000, p. 150). However, the most important principle in E. Marx’s late-nineteenth-century critique, that no one should be able to say “my hands” when referring to another person, remained intact in Dunayevskaya’s mid-twentieth-century critique. Indeed, several common threads bind together the work of all three.

An important theme that weaves through the work of all three is the complex entanglement of revolutionary consciousness, human agency, and institutional structures. Early in their own intellectual development K. Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels traced out the strands of this entanglement. Humans, K. Marx and Engels noted, are a social species—we can only be fully human in community with others. But while we cannot be fully human in isolation, the social structures of the communities in which we are human together may also damage and diminish us (Marx and Engels 1970, p. 83). K. Marx and Engels charged that this was so of the structure of society in their time and place; E. Marx, Luxemburg, and Dunayevskaya all considered it still true in their times and places. A person struggling to endure this unsatisfactory state of society may develop a revolutionary consciousness, a vision that things could be different. The vision alone cannot change the world if the material basis of society remains unchanged. That is, if the existing institutional structures, within which workers’ labor produces value and owners of capital appropriate it, remain in place, we cannot philosophize our way to a more just world. However, revolutionary consciousness can inspire and inform the exercise of agency; thought, therefore, is part of the revolutionary process that can change a society’s institutions (Marx and Engels 1970, pp. 93–94). E. Marx, Luxemburg, and Dunayevskaya all embraced this conclusion. They worked ceaselessly to communicate their critique of existing institutions. They worked, too, to reach and apply an understanding of how individual agency could gather into collective action by building smaller-scale institutions (e.g. unions, political parties, activist organizations) within the overarching large-scale institutions of society. And they worked to steer the collective action of the smaller-scale institutions they joined or founded toward the goal of changing the large-scale institutions of society for the better.

Another theme these three share is what we would now call intersectionality; E. Marx, Luxemburg, and Dunayevskaya all were deeply enmeshed in navigating and reshaping the inter-relations of class identity, gender identity, and national, ethnic, or racial identities. Marxism’s emphasis on class was, for them, no hindrance to their use of Marx’s theory of revolution for working simultaneously toward a revolution of gender relations and international cooperation.

Revolutionary consciousness, human agency, and institutional structure

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels assert that the lived experiences of the proletariat under capitalism can foster the emergence of a new consciousness. Spending the workday under

the autocratic rule of an employer and producing the wealth enjoyed by others while living in poverty cannot be endured forever. Workers sharing this experience with their peers may form “a consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution.” This consciousness is made concrete in acts of revolution. Participating in revolutionary acts, in turn, further develops consciousness (Marx and Engels 1970, pp. 93–94). Marx and Engels’ story is braided together from three major strands: institutional structure of the economy (the capitalists have power over the lives of workers), the workers’ potential to develop a revolutionary consciousness (they can come to recognize that capitalists wield power over them and object), and their agency (they resist the capitalists’ exercises of power and try to increase their own power). Someone intent on influencing the course of history must work with the strands of this braid.

Consciousness

One way to enter the tangle—and one that E. Marx, Luxemburg, and Dunayevskaya all worked at—is by grabbing hold of the strand of consciousness. If the institutional structure of class oppression fosters discontent, and discontent fosters a search for answers, there is an opening for critique. All three believed that if they could find people in a persuadable moment and be persuasive in their analysis of what is wrong and what could be different, they had the potential to transform inchoate discontent into a revolutionary consciousness.

Although she had been outspoken about politics since childhood, Eleanor Marx began her teaching and public speaking career with literary topics. She had a lifelong passion for literature and theater, which she saw as venues in which social conflicts could be illuminated and examined under the spotlights and in which other lives could be imagined. Her topics and venues shifted more and more to the overtly political from the mid-1880s through the 1890s. She made most effective use of her theatrical training not playing a fictional character on stage, though she tried that, but performing a public version of herself on the dais at public rallies. Even those with whom she was frequently in conflict considered her to be an electrifying public speaker. One listener described the effect of her speech as to make ideas that were radical challenges to the existing English power structure sound utterly reasonable and very attractive—but she did not shy away from taking a combative stance. She was so much in demand in 1897 that her voice gave out and she ran a notice in the socialist paper *Justice* expressing her regret that she could accept no more outdoor speaking invitations until her voice recovered (Kapp 1976; Holmes 2014, pp. 292, 299, 410).

Luxemburg, too, was known as a riveting public speaker. She progressed much farther in her formal education than had Eleanor Marx; her in-class debates with Professor Julius Wolf while enrolled in the University of Zurich in Switzerland might have been her first experience of holding the center of attention in a room and feeling an audience respond. She had an ambition to be influential and she judged that the best position from which to wield influence would be within the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). So after completing her graduate studies in 1898 she went to Germany—she finessed immigration restrictions with a sham marriage—and offered her services. The SPD leadership promptly dispatched her to Silesia, a Polish-speaking region of Germany or a German-occupied region of Poland, depending on one’s perspective. She was elated at discovering and developing her confidence as a speaker and loved the feeling of connecting with an audience. Once recalled from Silesia to Berlin, which was the center of gravity for most of her activities for the remainder of her life, Luxemburg exercised her rhetorical skills in German as well. She did so as a speaker at SPD Congresses, international meetings, and as a revered and renowned teacher at the SPD school (Nettl 1969; Ettinger 1986).

Luxemburg also left a larger (attributed) print trail than did Eleanor Marx. She contributed extensively to theoretical debates within the SPD, which were carried out in large part in the pages of a variety of party papers. She believed it mattered what those in the SPD thought and it mattered what the SPD communicated to the outside world, so Luxemburg spoke and wrote constantly in an attempt to sway the party to her way of thinking and draw the wider public to the party (Nettl 1969; Ettinger 1986).

Dunayevskaya, like Luxemburg, made her mark on debates within organized Marxism. The Russian Revolution and the formation of the U.S.S.R. were, according to their leaders' claims, putting Marxist principles into practice. Unsurprisingly, those revolutionaries never reached a full consensus on what those Marxist principles were and how best to realize them in practice. Russian debates and power struggles, therefore, mattered to Marxists around the world. Leon Trotsky had played a major role in the revolution but, when Stalin rose to power in the 1920s, Trotsky's criticism of top-down autocratic political control earned him a trip into exile in Mexico and later death by assassination. During Trotsky's exile, Dunayevskaya served for a time (1937–1939) as his personal secretary. Then, in the 1940s she became a prominent voice of dissent among Trotsky's allies. In the 1950s she broke entirely with Trotskyism and began writing extensively on the newly emerging Marxist-Humanist strand within the evolution of Marxist thought (Howard and King 2000; Fromm 1966, p. 74).

But Dunayevskaya was not only interested in debates with others who already described themselves as Marxists. She also listened to, spoke to, and wrote for activists organizing around issues of labor, racial justice, and women's liberation. She was central in the 1955 founding of the News and Letters Committees, an activist organization, and the affiliated *News and Letters*, a biweekly newspaper. *News and Letters* published articles and letters, often by manufacturing workers, intended primarily for an industrial working-class readership. She collaborated in this project with Detroit autoworker Charles Denby; both Dunayevskaya and Denby remained in leadership positions in the organization for the remaining thirty(ish) years of their lives. *News and Letters* was meant as a venue for communication among writers and readers who shared many of the concerns that motivated Dunayevskaya, even if they did not enter the conversation already sharing the theoretical language of Marxist Humanism (News and Letters Committees; Raya Dunayevskaya Collection).

E. Marx, Luxemburg, and Dunayevskaya were convinced that the world could be better than it was, but to make it better would require understanding it, and understanding is not easy. As Dunayevskaya put it, theory "is not something one 'picks up' en route to somewhere else. It requires labor, hard labor, to work out" (Dunayevskaya 2002, p. 282). They each worked to share their understanding with others through public speaking and writing for a wide public readership because the construction of a revolutionary consciousness is an experience worth sharing. When shared widely enough, this consciousness becomes not just a private experience, but a social force.

Agency

When the daily experience of class oppression that is institutionalized in the fabric of society combines with exposure to revolutionary ideas, and when that combination results in a widely shared revolutionary consciousness, that consciousness can manifest in concrete actions. The oppressed can exercise agency to resist their oppression.

The fall and winter of 1887–1888 had been especially hard times in England. A sharp economic downturn and bitter weather combined to leave a wide swath of the working class hungry and cold. Gaunt, malnourished people haunted the streets of London's working-class East

End. E. Marx wrote to a friend, “in the streets here one sees so many starving people—people with hunger in every line of their faces that one cannot but be wretched” (Kapp 1976, pp. 220–222). The plight of the dockworkers pained E. Marx as much as anything she saw. There could hardly be a more vivid illustration of Karl Marx’s theory of the reserve army of labor: more men than employers would hire crowded the docks each morning and fought one other to be among the few who secured the miserably underpaid day work on offer. Wooden railings were replaced with iron to better withstand the stampede; some, especially smaller men, were injured when crushed against the fence. E. Marx marveled that they fought each other rather than uniting to fight the exploiting class and surmised that the exploiting class feared such a shift could be imminent (Kapp 1976, pp. 262–263). Indeed, the shift came.

From 1888 to 1890, in one workplace after another, conditions that workers had endured without serious protest for years came to seem unendurable, and in one workplace after another, workers took on considerable risk and hardship to fight for change. Each action produced a shift in consciousness among those who had not taken action yet—and then, in one surge after another, more did take action. In those tumultuous years, E. Marx observed how discontented resignation tipped into discontented protest and she engaged with the back-and-forth between consciousness and action. She took part in marches and demonstrations—for free speech, for eight-hour workday legislation, for striking workers—as an organizer and speaker. Although there was no fundamental revolution in the institutions that structure a capitalist economy, many of the labor actions that bubbled up from below achieved some surface-level but real material changes such as increased pay and shorter work hours (Kapp 1976; Holmes 2014).

A decade and a half later, Luxemburg watched the events unfolding in Russia. As E. Marx had seen in England in 1888–1890, but on an even larger scale, a wave of labor actions and political demonstrations built up over the better part of a decade without much central organization and crested in 1905. Russia’s government at the turn of the twentieth century was more absolutist and repressive than England’s (where E. Marx was most active) or Germany’s (where Luxemburg was based). Russian workers did not have political rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, but they assembled and spoke nonetheless. In 1905 they did not (yet) entirely overthrow the institutions of governance by monarchy and capitalist control of economic production. Nevertheless, workplace actions won reduced working hours and raised wages, and political demonstrations won increased civic freedoms (Luxemburg 2004, pp. 181–187).

Luxemburg disseminated her analysis of this eruption of action in the pamphlet *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions*, published in 1906. The pamphlet’s core argument can be summarized this way: Each action alters the consciousness of revolutionary class. The altered consciousness of the revolutionary class then changes the chances of a next action taking place and shapes the form the next action will take. (So far this echoes K. Marx and Engels’ essays of the 1840s.) For these reasons, Luxemburg concluded that the urgent political lesson for her time was that revolutionary change cannot be plotted in advance and does not proceed through a predictable series of phases that follow in linear order. Instead, an unpredictable, experimental series of actions, temporary partial advances, and temporary partial setbacks unfold outside of the control of any central command structure. A mass strike cannot be marked on your calendar in advance (Luxemburg 2004).

Many of Luxemburg’s colleagues in the SPD believed they held the option of a mass strike in reserve, though they had never attempted to call one. This, she argued, was a grave mistake. The leadership of the party could not call a shared revolutionary consciousness into being at will and ensure that the masses were ready for an action that they had so far refrained from taking. Indeed, the facts of the case in Russia were the reverse. Russians engaged in “a multiplicity of

the most varied forms of action,” and these were not orchestrated in advance (Luxemburg 2004, pp. 172–173). The centrally organized demonstration strike might appear, because of the extensive coordination required, to be “the most mature form of the mass strike” but a mass strike is more likely, in fact, to be most important “in the *beginnings* of the movement.” Mass strikes raise consciousness; heightened consciousness then leads to fighting strikes—Luxemburg’s term for a workplace-based action with employment, wage, working conditions, or work time demands. With the slight loosening of political repression achieved in the strikes, the room to maneuver politically grew and more coordinated collective action could emerge. Political demonstration strikes and economic fighting strikes interact in “complete reciprocal action” (*ibid.*, pp. 185–187, 193–195).

Luxemburg believed that whatever the concessions that might be won from employers, those are not the enduring achievement of an economic fighting strike. Increasing the standard of living, she wrote, is not an end goal and is not, on its own, lasting—capital will claw back what it ceded under duress. What lasts, in Luxemburg’s view, is the “mental sediment.” The first outbreak of action in Russia, she wrote,

reacted inwardly all the more powerfully as it for the first time awoke class feeling and class consciousness in millions upon millions as if by an electric shock. And this awakening of class feeling expressed itself forthwith in the circumstances that the proletarian mass, counted by millions, quite suddenly and sharply came to realize how intolerable was that social and economic existence which they had patiently endured for decades in the chains of capitalism. Thereupon there began a spontaneous general shaking of and tugging at these chains.

Political education, she wrote, is achieved “by the fight and in the fight” (Luxemburg 2004, pp. 181–185).

Dunayevskaya not only recognized a reciprocal relationship between consciousness and agency, but she collapsed the distinction between the two. She pointed to the U.S. coal miners’ general strike of 1949–1950 as a turning point in her intellectual development. She saw the coal miners’ strike action as itself a form of theory; the strikers’ demands—which transcended simple wage bargaining to emphasize the quality of life below and above ground—were working out a humanist philosophy. She concluded that action, what she often called “masses in motion,” is a force of history, as Luxemburg had so clearly seen, *and also* a force of reason. She credited Marx with the recognition that practice was a source of philosophy and developed her analysis by tracing Marx’s intellectual roots in Hegel. She put particular emphasis on Hegel’s concept of negation as a positive, multi-step movement forward: first a negation of (reaction against) the conditions of the world as it is, then reaction against the first negation (Dunayevskaya 2002, pp. 275, 295–297).

Just as she had found philosophy in the coal miners’ strike in 1950, over the following decades she found philosophy in the movements fighting racial exclusion and sex-based hierarchies. Race and sex, like class, are built into the structure of social institutions. She saw the movements that aimed to dismantle and replace the existing institutions of inequality as living, breathing embodiments of the second negation at the core of her philosophy. She pointed out, for example, that the Women’s Movement was a reaction against the Left not from outside but from *within* the Left, pushing it farther. Leftists asked why workers produced value appropriated by capitalists (first negation). Feminists asked why male Leftists still expected women to be sexually subservient and to do all the cooking and cleaning and childcare (negation of the first negation). Dunayevskaya’s developing Marxist-Humanist philosophy was rooted in the lived struggles for dignity. She wrote, “Absolute humanism is surely the articulation needed to

sum up a classless, non-racist, non-sexist society, where truly new human relations self-develop” (Dunayevskaya 2002, pp. 282–283).

But even though action is a source of theory it must also, if it is to have any hope of more than momentary success, come from theory. Philosophy and social change come “not by practice alone” (Dunayevskaya 2002, p. 275). Philosophy was, for her, more than a tool for interpreting revolutionary change. Instead, philosophy was a tool for making revolutionary change—and the philosophical tools needed to make change emerged from the practice of making change. Neither is fully determined by or entirely prior to the other. She insisted that in Marx’s own writing, in his adaptation of Hegel’s principle of second negativity, there was a philosophy of revolution that was an indispensable tool for sought-after revolutions, not only in economic class relations but also in the racial and sexual order. Thinking out a philosophy of revolution, she wrote, is not something to be studied “in the manner in which one gets a degree”; it is “an urgent task *to do*” (Dunayevskaya 2002, p. 287).

Institutions

One way to describe the braiding together of consciousness, agency, and institutions is to begin the story with institutions—this is what K. Marx and Engels did when they wrote that the miseries and contradictions of the existing structures of society spark “a consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution.” If those of revolutionary consciousness exercise their agency and succeed, the story can circle back to institutions, but to institutions that have been transformed. A different type and scale of institution is also important in the middle of the story: along the way to fundamental transformation of the large-scale structures of society that we inherit from our ancestors and deed to our descendants, revolutionaries will need smaller-scale institutions of voluntary affiliation such as unions, political parties, and activist organizations to coordinate their collective actions. E. Marx, Luxemburg, and Dunayevskaya were all intellectually interested and actively involved in the question of how to build effective institutions of this second type, social change organizations. Some action for social change can bubble up, seemingly spontaneously, and an effective organization must harness the impetus for positive change through organizing, but without stifling the impulses that emerge unplanned.

During the 1880s and 1890s, Eleanor Marx took part in English socialist organizations that aimed for a class transformation at the national, perhaps international level. These social change organizations were not rooted in any particular workplace or category of worker, and even included members from relatively privileged backgrounds whose interest in socialism was more ethical than material (Kapp 1976; Holmes 2014). E. Marx, along with everyone else in these groups, continuously struggled with organizational strategy, especially the tension between the potential benefits of a big tent and the contrasting potential benefits of a tight consensus. She was a consistent free speech advocate, and if promoting openness to debate and dissent within the nation is good, surely there is some good to be derived from accommodating debate and dissent within an organization smaller than the nation, too. However, a voluntary membership organization and a nation are not the same, and the attempt to accommodate too wide a variety of opinion within an organization risks leaving the organization unable to take collective action. E. Marx did not follow a rigid, consistently applied principle regarding the right level of openness for organizations in general, but instead made a judgment specific to each organizational struggle she confronted (Kapp 1976; Holmes 2014).

She participated in splits; she was a founding member of the Socialist League, which split off from the Social Democratic Federation in 1884, arguing that the disagreements within the Social Democratic Federation were too significant and their educational mission needed a more

unified body. In 1888 the Socialist League itself split apart. E. Marx was among those dissatisfied with the organization's self-imposed restriction to education and its abstinence from participation in Parliamentary government, with all the messiness and compromises that political action entails (Kapp 1976, pp. 44–72, 197–199, 248). Yet at the same time that she felt it necessary to break away from larger organizations whose positions she could not countenance, she lamented the fracturing of the movement and took part in a failed attempt to call a meeting exploring the possibility of reuniting the various socialist organizations. To no avail. English socialism remained profoundly schismatic (Kapp 1976, pp. 52–53, 248, 264–265).

England was not uniquely fractious. During his lifetime, Karl Marx and his collaborators formed the First International Workingmen's Association to promote working-class solidarity, disseminate Marxist theory, and foment social change across Europe. Contentious disputes within and among a number of countries led to the dissolution of the organization. Similar disputes nearly derailed the formation of a Second International Workingmen's Association, whose organizers intended to pick up the work begun by the first. But somehow or another, with the contribution made during the planning stages by E. Marx's cajoling and corresponding, an inaugural Congress of the Second International was organized to take place in Paris in the summer of 1889. With the continual contribution made by her translation throughout the proceedings, the Congress was held and some business successfully accomplished. The parties present agreed to return to their respective countries and organize May Day demonstrations in favor of the eight-hour workday (Kapp 1976, pp. 291–315).

Upon her return to England, E. Marx found that a wave of more spontaneous actions was already under way, having bubbled up from outside the ranks of self-identified socialists. Several groups of workers in England were a step ahead of the Second International's call for the eight-hour workday and had begun to agitate for reduced work hours without having any institutional affiliation with the Second International (Kapp 1976, pp. 291–321; Holmes 2014, pp. 317–333). However, even though the socialist organizations she already belonged to did little to start the labor revolt, E. Marx never believed that heightened class-consciousness and spontaneous action would be enough to sustain the changes the revolt achieved. Even if the revolt did not result in fundamental transformation of capitalist class relations, the concessions won from employers could be institutionalized by means of union representation and legislation establishing labor standards.

When 100,000 dockworkers went on strike and all but shut down commerce in the city of London, E. Marx helped out with behind-the-scenes clerical tasks and correspondence, in addition to taking the stage to speak at the massive public demonstrations. The dockworkers' action achieved some, though not all, the workers' demands and also resulted in the formation of a union. In her speeches to striking Telegraph and Cable Workers, E. Marx asserted that the most important achievement of the recently concluded dockworkers' strike was the union. She emphasized that an increase in wages, should workers win one, could not be a lasting victory unless the strike also resulted in organization. Strikes could disrupt the existing disproportionate power held by capitalists, but a union could provide an institutional structure for the workers' continuing exercise of power. So some of her organizational efforts shifted toward the new organizations that were arising from spontaneous revolts. When the newly formed Gasworkers Union held their first election, she became an important mentor for Will Thorne, the General Secretary, tutoring him in the literacy and record-keeping skills needed in his new position. She was also nominated for the Executive Council of the Gasworkers Union herself and was the only nominee to be unanimously elected (Kapp 1976, pp. 328–347).

At the May Day demonstration organized in fulfillment of the plans formed at the inaugural Congress of the Second International, E. Marx urged the use of state power, as well as union organization. She said to the crowd assembled in Hyde Park,

Those of us who have gone through all the worry of the Dock Strike, and especially the Gasworkers' Strike, and have seen the men, women and children stand round us, have had enough of strikes, and we are determined to secure an eight hours' day by legal enactment; unless we do so, it will be taken from us at the first opportunity.

E. Marx 1890

Small-scale victories won through action can only be maintained if they reform existing institutions of society, and victories can only be expanded upon—reform can only blossom into revolution—if there are effective social change organizations continuing the struggle.

Luxemburg confronted as E. Marx did, the challenges of building social change organizations that could take aim at society's large-scale institutions. She, too, engaged with the dynamic interplay between top-down organization and bottom-up emergent action. While E. Marx's thoughts on these matters must mostly be reconstructed from her activism, Luxemburg wrote more sustained analyses. It is Luxemburg's vocabulary of spontaneity vs. organization (or so it is rendered in English translation) that has provided an enduring mental toolkit for thinking about this question.

Early in her career Luxemburg was involved in an organizational schism. There was already an established Polish Socialist Party (PPS), but the PPS advocated Polish independence and Luxemburg was resolutely opposed to all nationalist movements. She felt unable to work for or with the PPS but for practical, tactical reasons, she needed a national party affiliation: she wanted to have standing for representation at the upcoming Congress of the Second International. Her solution was to lead the formation of a new socialist party, named Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP), in 1893 (Nettl 1969, pp. 45–58).

However, despite starting (and later ending) her career with an organizational split, she spent most of her working life committed to dissent within a big tent. Her drive to be at the center of things took her to Germany and she joined the German Social Democratic Party (SPD)—Germany's SPD had a stable institutional structure and operated publicly after the 1890 repeal of Germany's anti-socialist laws. Once a member, she maintained loyalty to the party through a great many disputes and debates. She was sometimes a representative of the party, and often a voice of dissent within the party, but consistently worked within the existing party structure. During her years of active membership in the SPD, 1898–1914, the party was sufficiently democratic and well supplied with outlets for dissenting voices to accommodate—but not contain—her (Nettl 1969).

Luxemburg's appreciation for internal dissent and debate informed her critique of Lenin's push for centralization of authority over the Russian socialist movement. Luxemburg's article entitled "Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy," written in response to Lenin's book *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, was published in *Neue Zeit* in 1904. Lenin argued that in order to change the centralized institutions of economic and political power in Russia, the socialist movement must be similarly centralized. In her article, Luxemburg agreed that organization at a national scale was essential and she admitted that the extremes of authoritarianism in czarist Russia posed problems for the Russian socialist movement that differed somewhat from the problems faced by socialist movements in places with more developed bourgeois republican governments.¹ She insisted passionately, however, that Lenin's call for a Central Committee with ultimate authority, including the authority to organize fully subordinate local committees and select local leaders, was the wrong approach. Certainly, she agreed, Russian social democracy must have a nationally united organizational structure. But local party affiliates need enough autonomy from the central leadership to seize opportunities that present themselves at the smaller scale, to experiment, to cultivate creativity and self-discipline, not

obedience. Building a central authority “that alone thinks, acts and decides for everyone,” would mean only substituting blind obedience to a new authority for blind obedience to the old authority. It would blunt rather than develop revolutionary consciousness and the capacity for agency (Luxemburg 2004, pp. 250–254).

The doctrinal flexibility and organizational openness Luxemburg urged for Russian social democracy in the 1900s did not come to pass. At the outbreak of World War I, the SPD, too, failed her in this. The SPD had won representation in the German government and from their seats of newfound power capitulated completely to nationalism and militarism. Luxemburg felt betrayed; she broke with the party and joined with like-minded colleagues to form the German Communist Party. Once Germany conceded defeat and World War I ended, the social divisions that had been suppressed in the name of nationalism resurfaced. Luxemburg, as ever, stood on the side of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. The SPD, once a social change organization but now a defender of the institutional status quo, no longer stood for any such thing. They ordered her assassination. She was murdered in 1919 (Nettl 1969; Ettinger 1986).

Raya Dunayevskaya was deeply appreciative of Luxemburg’s prescience (Dunayevskaya 1991[1981]). Luxemburg’s warning to Lenin went unheeded and the U.S.S.R. did substitute one form of authoritarianism for another. Dunayevskaya picked up the argument two decades after Luxemburg’s death: Without democratic institutions, she insisted, the U.S.S.R. could not be truly socialist, either. During the 1940s she reached the conclusion that the U.S.S.R. was best understood as State Capitalist, not Communist. State ownership might have substituted for private ownership, but exploitative relations of production remained. In her first treatment of this idea, written under her oft-used pseudonym Freddie James, she wrote, “The Soviet Government occupies in relation to the whole economic system the position which a capitalist occupies in relation to a single enterprise.” The relation of government to citizen is “the real economic relation of state-capitalist-exploiter to the propertyless exploited” (quoted in Howard and King 2000, p. 150). The identity of the exploiter did not excuse the exploitative content of the relation.² She expanded this analysis in two articles in the *American Economic Review* in 1944 and 1945; her articles were part of a larger debate in the pages of *AER* over the relation between Soviet practice and Marxist theory. (Dunayevskaya also translated the full text of a Soviet article on the teaching of Marxist theory into English for the *AER*—the Soviet article prompted the particular round of the debate that she entered (Raya Dunayevskaya Collection; Dunayevskaya 1944, 1945).)

As she developed her analytical critique of society-wide institutional structures—of the U.S.S.R., the U.S., and elsewhere—Dunayevskaya, like E. Marx and Luxemburg, struggled with the challenges of social change organizations. Initially, her concerns about the development of the U.S.S.R. led her to her work as Trotsky’s personal secretary during his exile. But in 1939, when she reached the judgment that the rot went deeper than Trotsky could admit, she left that post. (Trotsky was assassinated the next year.) In the 1950s, Dunayevskaya broke off her remaining affiliation with groups loyal to Trotsky and followed her concern with human relations into new theoretical work and new organizational affiliations (Raya Dunayevskaya Collection; Howard and King 2000, p. 150).

Dunayevskaya’s admiration for Luxemburg did not lead to emulation of Luxemburg’s practice of dissent from within an organization. Instead, Dunayevskaya aimed to displace philosophical disagreements onto the external relations of one social change organization with another rather than sustaining internal disagreements. She wrote, “[W]hen a principle of philosophy *and* revolution is not in the ‘program,’ one should never join that organization, though one could participate in individual joint action against capitalism” (Dunayevskaya 2002, p. 298). Using her organizational practice to guide the interpretation of her difficult writing suggests

her meaning was this: When distinct organizations agree on a particular goal for changing some aspect of the larger institutions of society, they can coordinate on a particular action, but should not merge permanently. By spearheading the formation of the News and Letters Committee (see above) and maintaining leadership over the following decades, she was able to keep the organization's philosophical position well aligned with her own as she engaged in Civil Rights, Women's Movement, and labor activism, sometimes in conjunction with people and groups who approached the issues from a different angle (Raya Dunayevskaya Collection).

None of the three, E. Marx, Luxemburg, or Dunayevskaya, resolved the tension between spontaneity and organization. Revolution needs room for dissent and experimentation, so the larger the organization, the greater the need to allow for spontaneity within the organization and oppose excessive centralization. But when spontaneity succeeds, the gains have to be institutionalized if they are not to be lost. The organizations E. Marx helped establish to institutionalize the gains won in the hard-fought labor actions of 1888–1890 soon became a constraint on further change. Unions maintained modest concessions from employers but blocked more radically revolutionary demands, a pattern not at all unique to the London Gasworkers (Friedman 2008). Luxemburg hoped to preserve the space for spontaneity by allowing dissent within the same organizations that work to coordinate revolutionary action and institutionalize revolutionary change. She demonstrated her principled commitment to allowing dissent at a Congress of the Second International: She listened to an address in which Jean Jaurès, speaking in French, denounced her views and then, when no other translator was available, she translated his speech into equally pointed German herself (Nettl 1969, p. 125; Dunayevskaya 1991[1981]). While the German Social Democratic Party had little real power outside the administration of its own organization, it approximated Luxemburg's ideal of internal dissent. With state power to wield, however, the SPD became murderously repressive. Dunayevskaya saw that the puzzle of spontaneity vs. organization has no solution. Even the second negativity, although it moves us forward, is not the end of history. Challenging inequalities within groups dedicated to revolutionary change, as in the example of the Women's Movement challenging male Leftists, raises the question of what happens *after* the envisioned revolution. Dunayevskaya's conclusion (and her reading of Marx's phrase "revolution in permanence") was that there is no utopian end state. When past changes are institutionalized, they become new constraints. "[R]evolution must be continuous *after* the overthrow of capitalism" (Dunayevskaya 1991, pp. xxix–xxx; 2002, p. 297).

Class and its intersections with race and gender

Dunayevskaya concluded that the overthrow of capitalism is not sufficient because, as she, Luxemburg, and E. Marx all understood, capitalist class exploitation is not the only source of human suffering, the only obstacle to human flourishing. Multiple dimensions of unequal power are interrelated. Gender, race, nationality, and class all interact in complex ways.

Eleanor Marx was particularly attuned to the injuries of sex. She saw the burdens borne by her mother Jenny Marx and by the family's lifelong servant Helen Demuth. They tied their fates to a man who was impeccably revolutionary, but that was no protection against the particular degradations endured by women *as* women in their time and place.³ As the youngest in the family, E. Marx saw her two elder sisters fall to a similar fate: They both married French revolutionaries and then followed wherever their husbands' political activities took them, keeping house in unpredictable circumstances, bearing and too often losing children. She wanted more autonomy and more direct engagement with the public sphere than the older women in her family had (Kapp 1976; Homes 2014).

In 1886 she and her long-time *de facto* (though never *de jure*) husband Edward Aveling co-authored an essay published in the *Westminster Review* entitled “The Woman Question, From a Socialist Perspective.” They later revised the essay and published it with some commercial success as a freestanding pamphlet. In this work they explore the interrelation of class and sex. They diagnose the ills of a capitalist class society that is also structured by unequal gender relations; the two are, they argue inseparable. “The woman question,” they write, “is one of the organization of society as a whole.” Women’s exclusion from well-paid employment makes them economically dependent on men and therefore subject to any arbitrary abuses of power men may subject them to. “Women are the creatures of an organized tyranny of men, as the workers are the creatures of an organized tyranny of idlers.” But men, too, stand to gain from women’s emancipation. Because women and men are rigidly forced into separate economic roles, they are alienated from one another, prevented from enjoying the richer social and sexual relationships that more shared experiences would foster. “But when each sex is incomplete . . . and when, as a rule, neither of them comes into real, thorough, habitual free contact, mind to mind, with the other, the being is neither whole nor entire.” Men and women both could be liberated by a feminist approach to socialism (or a socialist approach to feminism). Indeed, E. Marx and Aveling conclude that women’s emancipation cannot occur without socialism, nor can socialism achieve its aims without a revolution in sex roles (Aveling and Marx 1886).

By contrast, few would be emancipated in any substantive way by the women’s rights demands then being put forth by some upper-class women. The many women who were waged workers or dependent on their working-class husbands’ wages would not be relieved of their exploitation by expanding women’s property rights and access to higher education; extending the privileges already enjoyed by elite men to elite women would do nothing for the non-elite majority. E. Marx was certainly not interested in supporting a cross-gender alliance of the elites to protect their class privileges, but she saw an urgent need for a cross-gender alliance of the working class to challenge the privileges of the elites. Viewing women as full and equal human beings, therefore, has profound consequences for the socialist imagination and the project of class mobilization. (Plenty of male trade unionists, alas, were not persuaded.) She must have gotten tired of having to remind socialism’s moralizing critics, over and over, that socialism’s call for property in common does *not* mean wives in common; women are human beings, not property (Aveling and Marx 1886; Holmes 2014, pp. 259–267; Kapp 1976, pp. 85–86, 164).

Although published as a single-authored work under Friedrich Engels’ name, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* can also be taken as an indicator of E. Marx’s views. She and Engels were frequent companions during the development of Engels’ essay, as was true for the many years they both lived in London, and her perspectives likely informed his writing. She, in turn, found his rendering of the ideas useful. In a letter to the editor of a periodical titled *Justice*, she drew particular attention to a quotation that she felt an earlier article had not fully appreciated: “[I]n the family the man is the bourgeois, the woman represents the proletariat” (Engels 1884; Holmes 2014, p. 258; E. Marx 1896).

Eleanor Marx was also a vocal advocate for national self-determination. As a teen she identified passionately with the cause of Irish independence and continued throughout her life to oppose English imperialism everywhere it manifested. In 1885 she participated in the Socialist League’s protests against imperialist war in Sudan. The League’s pamphlet countered the nationalist rhetoric designed to drum up support for the war by pointing to the class division of interests within England. The primary beneficiaries of colonialism, they charged, are the capitalists who gain access to new markets, new materials, new sources of labor. But who risks their lives?

Is it the market-hunting classes themselves? . . . No! But the sons and brothers of the working classes at home. . . . They it is who conquer, for the wealthy middle and upper classes, new lands for exploitation, fresh populations for pillage.

Socialist League pamphlet, as quoted in Kapp 1976, pp. 66–67

This position is consistent with the views E. Marx shared in letters with friends and with her consistent support for similar protests. She saw national self-determination for colonized regions of the world as a way to constrain the reach of the capitalists based in the imperialist center. As strongly as E. Marx opposed the international expansion of the reach of the ruling class, she advocated the international cooperation of the working class. She was bitterly disappointed whenever English workers opted to protect their relative privilege over workers in colonized or less developed nations rather than to challenge the ruling elites in solidarity with those other workers (Kapp 1976, pp. 291–317).

Luxemburg, more than either E. Marx or Dunayevskaya, seemed to wish that divisions along lines of gender or national identity would go away and stop bothering her. She rejected the SPD leadership's initial attempts to assign her to "the woman question," seeing that for someone like herself, with ambitions to be influential, the woman question was a dead end. Urging her to take it up was a move to marginalize her in the party (Dunayevskaya 1991, pp. 1–3). She succeeded in remaining outside the woman question pigeonhole—photographs of party conferences and Congresses of the Second International often show her as the one woman among a sea of black-suited men.

Yet despite her reluctance to speak or write at length on the woman question, Luxemburg, like E. Marx, saw socialism and women's emancipation as inseparable. She avoided being too closely identified with women's issues in order to retain influence on other questions, but was a long-time close friend and collaborator of Clara Zetkin, who was for many years at the helm of the socialist Women's Movement in Germany and beyond. Luxemburg urged the women assembled in 1907 for the first International Socialist Women's Conference to maintain an independent organizational identity, rather than to merge with and risk being silenced by male-dominated socialist organizations (Dunayevskaya 1991, p. 13). She expressed admiration for Zetkin's work organizing women as women—not just as workers—to be leaders, thinkers, revolutionaries. Luxemburg saw capitalism's disregard for the caregiving and housekeeping work most often done by women as a clear illustration of the inhumanity of capitalism as an economic system.

From [a capitalist] point of view, the music-hall dancer whose legs sweep profit into her employer's pocket is a productive worker, whereas all the toil of the proletarian women and mothers in the four walls of their homes is considered unproductive. This sounds brutal and insane, but corresponds exactly to the brutality and insanity of our present capitalist economy.

Luxemburg 2004, p. 241

She was uncompromisingly committed to full universal suffrage—she reacted with disgust and disdain to those who called male-only suffrage "universal." As strong as her disgust for so-called socialists who would sell out women's rights was, her disgust for the upper-class women's rights movement might have been even stronger. She called bourgeois women "parasites of the parasites of the social body" whose only function is the biological reproduction of the ruling class. Elite women could be fierce in their objections to male prerogatives, she observed, but "would trot like docile lambs in the cap of conservative and clerical reaction if they had suffrage" (Luxemburg 2004, pp. 240–241).

Luxemburg's commitment to international cooperation led her, quite out of step with most of the Left at the time, to oppose all nationalist movements. Her dissertation research on the economic development of Poland convinced her that, as onerous as the political subjugation of Poland by the Russians and Germans was, the country's economic development depended on its economic integration with these larger units. She believed that economic development would lay the groundwork for the maturation of the proletariat and thereby for future revolution. Nationalist movements would simply empower local elites and distract workers from class-consciousness with nationalist jingoism. Patriotism did not resonate with her—and because of her Jewish background other people's patriotism often did not include her in their definition of the nation—so she could not appreciate the strength of anyone else's identification with their nation rather than their class. Luxemburg's biographer Nettel observed, “[T]he only real fatherland she knew or wanted [was] the proletariat in general and German Social Democracy in particular” (Nettel 1969, p. 20).

Nationalist movements among the colonized were the dominant form of resistance to colonialism. Luxemburg simultaneously opposed these nationalist movements and articulated a bitter, thorough critique of colonialism. During a period when European powers were busily vying with each other for control of other continents, she was the first and most prominent figure to push the socialist movement to position colonialism as a core issue in the critique of capitalism. Her largest scale theoretical work, *The Accumulation of Capital (A Contribution to an Explanation of Imperialism)*, first published in 1913, argued that colonial expansion is a necessary feature of capitalism. Capital's drive to expand can never be contained within the already-capitalist regions of the world but must continuously reach into new, not-yet-capitalist regions and metabolize them.

Luxemburg did not just argue the point in the abstract. *The Accumulation of Capital* also details what colonization looks like in the colonies. She described English rule of India—“Not until 1867 was England able to appreciate the results of her noble efforts in this respect. In the terrible famine of that year a million people were killed in the Orissa district alone”—and French rule of Algeria—by the late 1860s “more than forty years of French rule culminated in wide-spread famine and a disastrous mortality rate among the Arabs” (Chapter 27). She explained the means by which China was opened up as a market for European capitalists, with the English leading the way: brutal military slaughters (Chapter 28). She illuminated the commonalities between the extension of capitalist power in North America and in South Africa: first violent depopulation and displacement of native people to make way for settlers' petty production, then the destruction of petty production to make way for large-scale capital. In the U.S., American Indians who survived the violence were “driven like cattle to the West to be folded in reservations like so many sheep,” and then the European settlers, in turn, were “driven beyond the Mississippi to make way for capital.” In South Africa the Boers, Dutch settlers, had by the 1860s gained control of the land and “built their peasant economy like parasites on the backs of the Negroes, compelling them to do slave-labor for them.” Then English capital sought to displace Boer peasant economy. “Both competitors had precisely the same aim: to subject, expel or destroy the colored peoples, to appropriate their land and press them into service by the abolition of their social organizations” (Chapter 29). The racial difference of colonized people in Africa and Asia made the harms of imperialism too often invisible to Europeans, and Luxemburg herself sometimes wrote in the language of racial labels and stereotypes that was current in Europe, but still she insisted that her readers see that colonized people had prior complex societies and that European domination, achieved through the violent destruction of their existing social institutions, caused tremendous human suffering (Luxemburg 1951[1913]; Dunayevskaya 1991[1981]).

Dunayevskaya admired Luxemburg, but objected to the theoretical basis of *The Accumulation of Capital*. She found enduring value in Luxemburg's empirical account of imperialism as experienced by the conquered, but in her 1981 book *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, she charged that Luxemburg painted the colonized as passive victims. Luxemburg's theory assumed that only the capitalist proletariat could be a revolutionary class and so did not identify the colonized as a potentially resistant, revolutionary force with agency of their own (Dunayevskaya 1991[1981], pp. 36–42). Dunayevskaya's reading of K. Marx's philosophy of revolution differed from Luxemburg's. In Dunayevskaya's interpretation, the proletariat is a revolutionary class, but not *the only* revolutionary class. K. Marx's account of the process of change can apply to other collective oppressions, the emergence of other collective subjectivities, other impulses to set the masses into motion. There are multiple dimensions of inequality and no one dimension is prior to the rest.

Instead, resistance in multiple dimensions is necessary. We cannot solve capitalist exploitation first, and then racism next, and then sexism. (Any other ordering would be equally impossible.) Negation, in the sense Dunayevskaya adapted from Marx's Hegelianism, is most powerfully positive when it is multifaceted. Her work with the News and Letters Committee, for example, integrated concerns with racial justice and labor organizing. White-only and white-majority unions often sought to preserve their relative status at the expense of nonwhite workers, but Dunayevskaya rejected this practice. In the early 1960s as national liberation movements strengthened African resistance to the direct European colonial rule Luxemburg had critiqued, she traveled extensively in West Africa to learn about the struggles and organizing strategies of workers who could rely neither on U.S.-and-Europe-dominated international labor organizations nor on African elites to prioritize their interests (Dunayevskaya 1962). Dunayevskaya found the theoretical principle of second negativity in Marx's philosophy of revolution and she found it in the practice of the Women's Movement (see above). The theory fit the experience, so she believed the Women's Movement could learn from Marxism—indeed she was sure all liberation movements could learn from Marxist Humanism. But Marxism also had to listen to feminism. She insisted that interpreting all social life as dependent first of all on economic class was an error, despite the fact that many Marxists did so. Furthermore it was an error she did not believe K. Marx himself made (Lovato 2015).

E. Marx, Luxemburg, and Dunayevskaya all saw the need to pursue both-and, not either-or battles for emancipation. They did not, however, agree in every particular. They differed in the dimensions they chose to emphasize. Dunayevskaya criticized *The Origins of the Family* for misinterpreting K. Marx's notes on which it was based and reducing the complexity of gender to class; she criticized *The Accumulation of Capital* for its assumption that the proletariat was the only revolutionary class (Dunayevskaya 1991[1981], pp. xxi–xxii, 36–42). So she was at odds with E. Marx and Luxemburg on certain points. Nevertheless, all saw that economic exploitation is not the entirety of an exploited worker's experience, and class is not the only facet of anybody's identity.

Conclusion

Eleanor Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, and Raya Dunayevskaya were simultaneously theorists and activists, meaning they lived the entanglement of thought and action. All three were very much of their times and all three sought to be a bridge to a different time: a better future in which human flourishing takes a decisive lead over human suffering.

The emergence of a new revolutionary consciousness among all people, enabling us all to be aware of and effectively exercise our own agency, is both the means and the ends of the social

change E. Marx, Luxemburg, and Dunayevskaya envisioned. All three were communicators and educators, with ambitions to directly influence thought. Luxemburg expressed her desire “to act on people like a thunderclap, to grip them by the head” (Nettl 1969, p. 109). The transformed consciousness, if their ambitions were to be realized, would not be objects of private contemplation among so many isolated individuals, but rather would be the raw material of mass social movement. The mass social movement would, in turn, reflect back on the consciousness of those touched by the upheaval and carry the potential to remake the large-scale institutions of society. Those mass movements encompass a tension between spontaneous action and coordinated organization. E. Marx, Luxemburg, and Dunayevskaya were organizers as well as being thinkers, and were continually confronted with questions of when and how and to what extent to institutionalize the social movements in which they took part. All three saw inequalities of class, race, and gender as inextricably linked and wrestled with the challenge of how to act on this knowledge when no action can tackle everything at once.

Revolution for human liberation is not a discrete task any of them ever expected to complete in their own time. It is a task that will never be completed for all time. But all three were sure that it was a task worth doing, in whatever flawed and partial way they could manage in their circumstances.

Notes

- 1 Despite Luxemburg’s famous opposition to “opportunism”—maintaining a hold on a modicum of political power by settling for modest reforms, a practice she denounced most pointedly in her critique of her SPD colleague Eduard Bernstein—she supported republican government as an expansion of space for action. Rights of assembly, speech, and suffrage make the next stage more feasible. Indeed, she argued that the newly arising capitalist elites will only support civil liberties as long as they are useful in capitalists’ struggle against the aristocracy. The true long-term defenders of republican liberties are socialists.
- 2 Dunayevskaya represented this position in debate with prominent Marxist theorist Ernest Mandel at the 1947 Conference of the Fourth International. The Second International that E. Marx helped to launch 1889 and Luxemburg took part in during the 1890s and 1900s had, phoenix-like, gone through two more dissolutions and rebirths by then.
- 3 Some of Jenny Marx’s surviving letters, begging friends for money when K. Marx did not generate enough for household expenses and she had little access to other resources, are excruciating to read. Helen Demuth, in the midst of navigating her complicated status in the Marx household, bore a child she could not keep and raise herself; E. Marx only discovered later in her life that the child’s father, never acknowledged, was almost certainly K. Marx.

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