Interview

USA/Philippines: Feminism's March from Nation to Home

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Johanna Brenner interviews Filipina feminist activist and writer Ninotchka Rosca about organizing in a transnational world.

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NINOTCHKA ROSCA, A writer of poetry and fiction as well as a long-time feminist and revolutionary activist, received the American Book Award for her novel Twice Blessed. Forced into exile from the Philippines in 1977, Rosca has lived and worked in the United States while maintaining close ties with the revolutionary and women's movements in the Philippines. In 2010, she helped to found Af3irm (Association of Filipinas, Feminists Fighting Imperialism, Re-feudalization and Marginalization), an anti-imperialist, transnational feminist women's organization (www.af3irm.org). Johanna Brenner interviewed her for *Against the Current*.

Johanna Brenner: How has your feminist perspective and activism evolved in relation to the experiences you have had, as a revolutionary, as a diasporic writer, as an advocate of women's liberation?

Ninotchka Rosca: My life has been a constant swinging between politics (as an organizer and polemicist) and literature, two extremes in character, one being very social and the other, solitary. I fell into politics almost by accident while my wish to be a writer was deliberate; I had no wish at all to be involved in politics but had from childhood been afflicted with the impetus to write.

It just so happened that he who would become chair of the new Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) was an English literature major at the university, so we writers grew familiar with the burgeoning political turmoil. I ended up involved somehow and just kept saying yes, all right, sure I can do that — not even aware we were making history. And the left-wing political argument was just so rational and explained a lot of things in the Philippines — in contrast to the obscurantism of religion and the divine-ordained class structure I grew up in.

When Marcos declared martial law, I was imprisoned, of course. [Martial law under U.S.-backed dictator Ferdinand Marcos lasted from 1972 until 1981 — ed.] Since there was agitation from international organizations like PEN and media organizations, the military decided to claim I had

something to do with a little ship that smuggled arms for the guerrillas. That was bizarre.

I went through five interrogations and spent six months in detention — which convinced me that the dictatorship just simply had to be overthrown. So for the next five years, I did what I could and it was getting worse all the time. People I knew — middle class, intellectuals — were being tortured and killed; women were being raped and assassinated.

When I got word that a case was being filed against me before the military tribunal, I ran. I got a fellowship to University of Iowa and thought I'd cool off for a year. I was on my way home (1977) when word came that my name was on the blacklist and I might be arrested at the airport. So I filed for political asylum. And then proceeded to do whatever I could to help people back home while writing novels, short stories, articles.

The Movement in Crisis

In 1989 I helped create Gabriela Network (GabNet), to provide solidarity for Gabriela, a large and militant women's organization connected with the left back home. Two years before, I had brought their slogan "Women's Rights Are Human Rights" to the United States and we were amazed at its immediate popularity.

It was both a good time and a bad time to establish an organization since the Philippine-based movement was undergoing a fractious time and there were splits all over the place. In the unleashing of what came to be known as the "anti-deep penetration agent" hysteria [when the CPP leadership accused members of being infiltrators — ed.], approximately a thousand activists were killed by their own comrades and more were tortured, including men and women who'd been with the movement from the very beginning.

This was a line struggle but it was also a power struggle. And it was somewhat shocking to witness the absolute fury and rage with which it was waged.

In the United States, the broader solidarity movement crumbled and the only organization which remained was our women's organization. By accident, and perhaps fortuitously, it grew up almost autonomous in its line-making and operations. Although we carried issues from the Philippines, we focused on those with a direct link here.

We were instrumental in organizing against U.S. military bases and raising awareness about the sex trafficking around them. We launched the first campaign on the comfort women issue [women forced into sexual slavery in wartime — ed.] as well as on Asian American children abandoned by fathers.

These campaigns led directly to the issue of mail-order brides and global sex trafficking, for which we practically had to invent a language as almost no one was interested in it. Our work led to IMBRA — the International Marriage Brokers Regulatory Act — passed by Congress in 2005.

The Big Split (which we ironically referred to as the BS) in the Philippines rolled along for a decade — 1988-1998; it began at the top levels of the movement around issues related to combat strategy and tactics and occurred among a handful of tight-knit men. The initial ideological discourse would soon devolve into name calling and labeling; some friends who didn't want to take a position were called counter — whatever and hounded out of the movement.

These events, which came to be known as the 2nd Rectification, had both negative and positive aspects. Negative aspects: they destroyed the consolidation of organizations, dumped practically all

which had been kept hidden from the State into the open, distracted everyone from the business of waging revolution, demoralized a great number of forces. Positive aspects: they opened up ideological discourse, called into question some of the memes by which work and process were conducted, and compelled some to examine theory and strategy.

For those of us who would eventually found AF3IRM, the question was, where do we make history. By "we" I mean transnational persons. If the focus of work is on the movement at home, we are not there. And because the focus is over there, rather than here, then we're not here, either. We found ourselves simply trying to determine which material condition or objective reality should take precedence in our struggle.

Struggling Where We Are

JB: A few years ago you gave a talk in Canada where you pointed out that circular migration has become the basis for a new ideal of the "borderless nation," through which the Philippine government attempts to maintain overseas workers' ties to their home country.

NR: The notion that circular migration is positive because it creates "transnational" people is convenient for imperialism as it hides the trap of impermanence for migrant workers who are forced to move from country back to home and out again. We have seen the institutionalization of circular migration through guest worker programs, dual citizenships, work visas, overseas contracts with term limits etc.

The Philippine government's current target for overseas deployment has been doubled from one million to two million going to 200 different countries. The majority are women. The government has worked very hard to ensure that migrants remain tied to their Philippine identity as part of a "borderless nation." The condition of impermanence created by circular migration justifies disengagement from the politics of the receiving country and from the need and duty to create change wherever we find ourselves.

Acceptance of this mythical "global nation" affects political work around transnational labor. When a Filipino worker suffers a mishap in, say, Saudi Arabia, the response is to attack the Philippine government — which is fine; but there's no commensurate attempt to change conditions in Saudi Arabia, Nigeria and other places.

The idea that exporting surplus labor was a means to alleviate poverty was accepted even by the Left. It was only last year, I believe, that the call was made to end labor export — a call GabNet made some 15 years ago.

This question of focus became urgent when the demand came for us to become a formal chapter of the "home-based" women's organization. We had to take a long hard look at that word "home."

The proletariat, as the saying goes, has no country; in which case, we reasoned, it was time to make every country a country for the proletariat, wherever he/she finds himself/herself. There was also the question of ideological, political and organizational leadership — which, through the years, had been selected often arbitrarily, based on the "old-boys-network."

It's a constant source of disappointment that despite 40 years of women's engagement in the Philippine movement, we have yet to see any formal ideological/theoretical work that reflected this history. The Philippine movement regards feminism, environmentalism, etc. as petty bourgeois

distractions, although such issues are seen to be useful when they can be used to underscore class exploitation.

Gabriela Philippines is considered and considers itself a national democratic organization — following the analysis of the CPP that the Philippines is a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society and needs a revolution that would establish national independence versus imperialism, and democracy versus feudalism. It called itself feminist for a while but that was changed during the 2nd Rectification campaign. Individual members may refer to themselves as feminist but I am not aware that the organization as a whole does.

The tension between political work fitting the material conditions of where we live, versus political work demanded by material conditions of the "home" country, had many layers.

Our work as a solidarity organization was successful because we had limited our concerns to those which had a clear enough link between the United States and the Philippines: the military bases, trafficking, migration, etc. It was not possible to carry the entire program of the Philippine movement — a program based on an analysis of society as semi-colonial and semi-feudal — into the material context of an advanced capitalist country.

For me personally, the demand that we take direction from a male-dominated movement was made more acute by reading and re-reading Gerda Lerner and her thesis regarding women's deprivation of historical signification. That decisions could be made about our future, our status, and what we should be, by those who were not directly engaged in our work, just made Lerner's thesis quite palpable. After all, our purpose for activism is to help make history, more than anything else.

Our internationalism was best expressed, we felt, in dealing head-on with the material conditions in which we found ourselves — as our numbers were growing by leaps and bounds in the United States.

We had to evolve — in one direction or another; and, following our impulse to contribute to the making of history, we chose collectively to become AF3IRM and engage fully with the situation here. The theme of our founding congress, if you recall, was From Nation to Home. We weren't just U.S. nationals but this was our home, and we would work to make it more amiable to our presence as transnational women.

Personally, it cost me. I had remained a permanent resident all these years; but when we made this decision, I took out U.S. citizenship. It dang broke my heart but the gesture had to be made. I still have to sigh heavily when I think back to this time.

These conclusions are the stuff of our experience. We did learn a lot from the Philippine movement; we learned ideology; we learned practice; we learned how to act collectively; we learned how to use power. The last was important because women are not socialized toward power.

JB: During the Occupy movement in New York, you helped to organize an all women march on Wall Street for November 25, which the global women's movement has institutionalized as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. What were you trying to accomplish?

NR: AF3IRM took the position, for the 16 Days of Activism, that identifying violence against women should include economic violence.* We worked with a few other groups and gathered 250+ women to march on that day, from Foley Square to Liberty Park (Zucotti Park). I overheard a male Occupy organizer say that he'd never seen as many women down there.

Our theme was WALL STREET IS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN! DISMANTLE IT!!! Violence against women is too often viewed — by mainstream feminists and often by "progressives" — separately from other institutionalized violence. We wanted to educate the Occupy movement and to highlight the many connections between capitalist globalization, impoverishment here and abroad, militarization, patriarchy and racism, and how they reproduce and reinforce gender violence.

It was admittedly a difficult endeavor, one of those that underscore my status as a diasporic person. On the one hand, it was clear I had the most experience — both operational and ideological — in guiding the thrust of this coalition. On the other hand, it was also clear that I was from "elsewhere."

This kind of Other-ing is irritating, to say the least; and it comes from Black, white and Asian, women. This is why Af3irm prefers the use of transnational women rather than (im)migrant women, since the latter implies either or both temporariness or a stranger (coming from elsewhere).

As in the trafficking issue, we are trying to create a more accurate language regarding globalization, so we can take full measure of the new phenomena it has unleashed on the world. Around 250 million men and women comprise transnational labor; this is a nationless nation, a floating population.

"Transnational" is a term ironically used for corporations, whose ownership and character remain the same, wherever their operations are located. People, on the other hand, change and amend their lives, based on their material conditions.

JB: What are you working on right now?

NR: We are working on the 2nd Congress of AF3IRM which will be in October 2013 around the theme "Building for the 4th Wave of Feminism."

The intent is to look at and build on the gains of the first three waves and rectify what's not there or does not apply to our specific experiences as women of transnational origins and histories.

Some of the Crimes of Wall Street

We are in search of an issue, a word — much like "equality" — to define the core of transnational feminism and make it indelible. We want to make history and to make history where it will matter to people like us, to transnationals like us.

We're still evolving and developing, looking for commonality among women of color, poor women of color; and still devising both our issues and plans of action; and most importantly, reflecting on our experience as creations of globalized imperialism and what that means in terms of theory and analysis. We don't have all the answers but we think we have some of the right questions.

• Women continue to suffer huge income disparity under the patriarchal system of gender/race discrimination.

• Women constitute 64% of U.S. minimum wage workers.

• Single mothers of color are the harest hit in the current mortgage crisis.

• Women are both consumers and commodity in corporate culture; women's bodies are the main merchandise of both the sex and labor trafficking markets.

• Multinational corporations derive 68% of their global profits from women workers who are paid the equvalent of $2 a day while creating products sold for hundreds of dollars in the United States and Europe.

• 200,000 women are in the U.S. military; half are deployed overseas. 30,000 single mothers have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

• The right to suffrage of women, particularly women of color and female senior citizens, is under attack.

—crimes sited in the leaflet for the November 25, 2011 action

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P.S.

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