

RECALLING ROSA LUXEMBURG

## Social Reform or Revolution

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Rosa Luxemburg (1870-1919) is one of the greatest figures ever produced by the international socialist movement. Her contribution, as theorist and activist, deserves to be recognised and celebrated by the newer generations of socialist activists who have become involved in the movement in recent decades.

Interest in Rosa Luxemburg among historians, political scientists and activists alike has increased considerably since the radicalisation of the 1960s and early 1970s brought with it a re-evaluation of the long-buried revolutionary tradition in the world socialist movement. The questioning of the reformist and Stalinist orthodoxies dominant on the left in the 1950s and 1960s, which accompanied this radicalisation process, made essential a reassessment of those socialist theorists and activists who fitted into neither of these categories.

Luxemburg, although her heritage in part was fought over by both social democrats and Stalinists, remains essentially a "heretic"—an outsider from the mainstream of 20th century European socialism. The fact that a socialist of her calibre was isolated in this way is a telling commentary on the failures and inadequacies of that movement. The present advanced political and social crises throughout the world demands that Rosa Luxemburg's immense contributions to the theory and practice of revolutionary Marxism are brought to the fore and programmatically incorporated into the vanguard strata of the international working-class movement.

Luxemburg's life activity and her political thought constitute an indissoluble unity. Her political career, like those of Lenin, Trotsky and other outstanding revolutionary socialists, was a living application of the third of Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach". Consequently, any analysis of the development of her political views must be projected upon the terrain of her political practice within the Polish, German and Russian labour movements.

Rosa Luxemburg's position as an "outsider", even within the European socialist movement, is perhaps partly attributable to her birth into a family of the cosmopolitan Polish-Jewish intelligentsia. Many of the greatest figures in European cultural and political history have been Jews, partly due to the tensile relationship between Jewish communities and the often hostile surrounding social environment.

From the start Rosa Luxemburg fought under the banner of revolutionary Marxism. Her earliest works were polemics directed against Blanquist and "economist" tendencies within the Polish socialist movement, and they cogently presented the case for a mass political struggle for democratic rights by the growing proletariat. She regarded the bourgeois revolution as an objectively indispensable phase in the development of the territories within the Russian empire.

### SELF-DETERMINATION FOR POLAND

It was for her contributions on the question of Polish self-determination that Rosa Luxemburg's role in the Polish labour movement is mainly remembered. This issue was to divide Polish social democracy into two sharply delineated tendencies—the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) and the Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKpil). The issue was fought out through the battle for recognition between these two parties at congresses of

the Second International. It also overflowed into debates conducted within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, founded in 1898.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had argued consistently in favour of Polish self-determination from the 1840s onwards. Apart from the democratic principle involved, such a struggle was seen as a counterweight to Russian absolutism, which the founders of Marxism considered to be the bulwark of European reaction. After 1871, with the development of an increasingly powerful revolutionary current in Russia, their positions partially altered in content, although not in form. The Polish liberation struggle was now seen as a decisive component in any future Russian revolution. Nowhere, however, in the works of Marx and Engels, was the national question dealt with at length in the form of a treatise, and of course the question of the national struggle in the epoch of imperialism was not raised at all during their lifetimes.

There are arguably several errors in Rosa Luxemburg's formulations on the national question. First, by insisting that the eminently political issue of Polish self-determination could be reduced to a function of economic development or "historic necessity", she was guilty of crass economic reductionism. The coming into being of the monopoly stage of imperialist capitalism by the late 19th century sure enough formed the economic basis for the superseding of national antagonisms. This could never be an automatic process, however; it would have to be mediated through political action. Herein, incidentally, lies the beauty of Lenin's final formulations on the national question; his recognition of the dialectical character of the slogan for national "self-determination as the right to secede"—a political articulation of the correct formula for the superseding of national antagonisms.

Closely associated with this failing in Luxemburg's analysis was her conception of the nation as essentially a cultural phenomenon: the political dimension -- i.e. the struggle to establish a nation-state, was thus neglected. Luxemburg did not recognise the revolutionary potential of national liberation struggles, only seeing in them anachronistic, petty-bourgeois features. The history of Third World revolutions in the 20th century is the most telling commentary on this error.

### **STRUGGLE AGAINST BERNSTEIN**

Rosa Luxemburg's entry onto the stage of German politics in 1898 coincided with one of the most momentous conflicts within the pre-war socialist movement. This was the revisionist controversy. Occasioned by the appearance in 1898 of a book—*Evolutionary Socialism*—written by Eduard Bernstein, the literary executor of Engels and a prominent figure in the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) leadership, the debate was in fact deeply rooted in the broadest dynamics of pre-war social democracy.

Although it was formally committed to a revolutionary Marxist program from 1891, the practical affairs of the SPD had in reality become increasingly restricted by the boundaries of reformist parliamentarism. This praxis was intimately related to the essentially stable economic development of the later decades of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Although this economic "boom" involved the accumulation of imperialist contradictions, it nevertheless allowed the regime of the Second Reich in Germany to make significant social and political concessions to the labour movement. The "minimum" program of social amelioration through partial economic demands (higher wages and improved working conditions) and for increased representation in the Reichstag—Germany's federal parliament—and provincial legislatures, clashed with the "maximum" program for socialist revolution outlined by Karl Kautsky in the SPD's Erfurt program of 1891. The whole spectrum of Second International Marxist theory and practice was refracted through this basic problem.

Rosa Luxemburg took up the cudgels against Bernstein's arguments, and her pamphlet *Social Reform or Revolution* (1898) stands out as the most articulate defence of revolutionary Marxism in this debate.

Luxemburg began *Social Reform or Revolution* by pointing out that the Bernstein controversy posed the question of "the very existence of the social democratic movement". She argued that Marxism differentiates itself from all forms of utopian socialism insofar as it identifies socialism and the socialist movement with the real process of historical development, i.e. with the tendency of capitalism to progressively socialise the means of production and more and more reduce class antagonisms to a conflict between a tiny minority of monopolistic or oligopolistic capitalists and a vast majority of exploited wage workers (*workers whether by hand or brain*). Bernstein had argued in *Evolutionary Socialism* that the development of large credit institutions, the trustification of industry and the emergence of a new middle-class salariat had lessened, rather than aggravated, the contradictions of capitalism.

Luxemburg brings in the key concepts of "ascending" and "descending" phases of capitalist development to refute Bernstein. Cartelisation of industry, the growing influence of finance capital, attempts to coopt the upper strata of organised workers, the militarisation of the state and its attendant bureaucracy: these are all interlinked phenomena of a general malaise (which Luxemburg later more directly characterised as imperialism).

Luxemburg's rejection of vulgar trade unionism (which Bernstein had characterised as an "offensive strategy") as a "labour of Sisyphus" antagonised the conservative German trade union leaders. On the question of parliamentarism and the prospects of bourgeois democracy, Luxemburg presciently remarks in *Social Reform or Revolution* that "if it is true that world politics and militarism represent a rising tendency in the present phase of capitalism, then bourgeois democracy must logically move in a descending line". The fate of the German left during the war, to say nothing of the fate of democratic rights in general in the 20th century, springs to mind here. Democratic rights however, for the proletariat, are not ends in themselves, but means to the end of the socialist revolution.

Although Bernstein's views were rejected by the SPD, it was not long before his theoretical arguments were put into practice. Alexander Millerand, a French socialist parliamentary leader, entered a bourgeois cabinet shortly after the Dreyfus affair (1899), in order to "save" the Republic. Thus a cardinal socialist principle was thrown to the winds, and it was not long before Millerand was sanctioning strike breaking. Luxemburg wrote in *Neue Zeit* (the SPD's theoretical journal) in 1900: "The circumstances which divide socialist politics from bourgeois politics is that the socialists are opponents of the entire existing order and must function in a bourgeois parliament fundamentally as an opposition."

Luxemburg's misconceptions concerning Leninism bore a close resemblance to Trotsky's, and their orientation to the Russian movement in the pre-war period was quite similar. Unfortunately, Rosa's errors were to have more serious consequences, as the revolutionary left of German social democracy found itself in need of an independent organisation during the period of war and revolution after August 1914.

### **THE MASS STRIKE**

The 1905 revolution in the Russian Empire had an immense impact upon the Western European socialist movement. The decisive role of the mass strike in these events was not lost on the revolutionary left of German socialism. Rosa Luxemburg's pamphlet *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions* sought to apply the lessons of the Russian experience (and of her own experiences as a participant in the Russian-Polish Revolution) to Germany. This pamphlet, and the wider debate of which it formed one major contribution,

widened the gulf between the attitudes of the conservative trade union bureaucracy and the professed positions of the SPD apparatus.

The idea of the general strike was an old one, originating in fact with the British Chartists, but in the era of the Second International it tended to be rejected as an anarcho-syndicalist concept. Indeed, syndicalism tended to conceive of the general strike in terms of an overall strategy, and there was a belief held that a mass withdrawal of labour could force the bourgeoisie to abdicate power. The events of 1905 in Russia had demonstrated that mass strikes, no matter how powerful, were not a substitute for the taking of state power, and that at a certain point an insurrection would be necessary to resolve a revolutionary situation in the favour of the proletariat. As a tactic however, the mass strike could be used for greater purposes than those for which the mere "demonstration"-type strike was employed by the Western labour movement in this era.

Luxemburg's central argument in *The Mass Strike* was that the class struggle cannot be arbitrarily divided into mutually exclusive arenas; the economic and political struggles in particular had to be conceived of as a unity. The other major point Luxemburg made here was that a mass strike could not be engineered at the whim of any leadership, but was an organic outgrowth of the mass movement. She did not, however, by any means support the spontaneist/syndicalist positions attributed to her by some later commentators, notably by Stalinists.

The issues raised by the 1905 revolution in Russia also led to an increasing rift between Luxemburg and the revolutionary left on the one hand, and the leading "centre" faction within the SPD, on the other. Luxemburg's personal relationship with Karl Kautsky, in particular, cooled at this time. She came to recognise the vacillating character of Kautsky, despite the latter's formal adherence to revolutionary Marxism, well before the future leaders of the Third International. Lenin, for instance, held Kautsky in high regard, considering him to be a master of theoretical Marxism, until August 1914, when World War I broke out.

### **1918 GERMAN REVOLUTION AND 1919 SPARTAKUS UPRISING**

Although the *Junius Pamphlet* shined as a beacon of internationalism from the dark pit of national chauvinism, there were a few points left either unanswered or dealt with incorrectly. Lenin published a review of the pamphlet which picked some of these up. Luxemburg had held in the *Junius Pamphlet* that "the great historic hour itself creates the forms that will carry the revolutionary movements to a successful outcome, creates and improvises new weapons, enriches the arsenal of the people with weapons unknown and unheard of by the parties and their leaders". In November 1918 the German Revolution began. Across Germany workers' councils sprang up and demonstrated decisively that this form of proletarian organisation, first in evidence in the 1905 Russian revolution, and then again in 1917 in that country, was to be a primary weapon in the working-class arsenal. Luxemburg's assessment, which had strong overtones of spontaneism, was thus far proven correct. The German proletariat did express its mass will through the creation of these instruments of dual power. However, the corresponding political consciousness—which in the Russian case had been provided, after a prolonged struggle from February to October 1917, by the Bolshevik party—was not there in Germany in 1918-19. The German councils were dominated by class-collaborationist (SPD) or centrist (USPD) groupings, which rapidly resolved to effectively dissolve these revolutionary organs into the bourgeois republican constitution of Weimar.

In the last year of her life, Rosa Luxemburg's political views developed against a hectic background of revolutionary upsurge in eastern and central Europe. Her initial assessment of the Russian October Revolution, published in the early 1920s, several years after her death, was enthusiastic though not uncritical: "All the revolutionary honour and capacity

which western social democracy lacked were represented by the Bolsheviks. Their October uprising was not only the actual salvation of the Russian Revolution; it was also the salvation of the honour of international socialism." The criticisms with which Luxemburg qualified this basic assessment have of course been utilised ad nauseam by those who would wish to bowdlerise her contribution, and reduce her to the dimensions of an ordinary petty-bourgeois democrat. But, as C Wright Mills points out: "She saw the pluses as well as the minuses of the Revolution, but she felt that the pluses far outweighed the minuses."

It is clear that on the questions of Bolshevik agrarian policy ("land to the peasants") and the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly, Luxemburg was not clearly aware of the nature of, nor the circumstances surrounding, these policies. She appeared to be unaware of the formulated alliance between proletariat and peasantry upon which the October victory rested, and unaware of the constitutional position of the soviets and their incompatibility with a bourgeois Constituent Assembly. She criticised the national policy of the Bolsheviks using similar arguments to those she had used earlier. There is some evidence that Luxemburg revised some of these opinions later on.

The catastrophe of the Spartakus uprising in January 1919, which led to the destruction of the flower of the German revolutionary movement, was not in fact sanctioned politically by Rosa Luxemburg. Nevertheless, once the decision to mount the insurrection was made, against her will, Luxemburg of course supported it to the hilt.

A few weeks before "Spartakus Week", she had delivered a speech to the founding convention of the German Communist Party (Spartakus League). In it she had reviewed the history of the pre-war Second International, declaring that "the fourth of August did not come like thunder out of a clear-blue sky; what happened on the fourth of August was not a chance turn of affairs, but was the logical outcome of all that the German socialists had been doing day after day for many years". Rosa Luxemburg recognised the necessity of a period of peaceful persuasion to win a majority of the working class to the program of the transfer of power to the workers' councils. The triumph of ultra-left adventurism within the young German Communist Party was in some ways a cruel punishment for her belated recognition of the need for an independent mass revolutionary party. Her death, at the hands of the Social Democratic Party, robbed the young German communist movement of a leader who could have altered the outcome of the series of catastrophic events to come. It robbed the international working-class movement of one of its most priceless leaders.

Luxemburg's last written words provide her epitaph: 'Order reigns in Berlin!' You stupid lackeys! Your 'order' is built on sand. Tomorrow the revolution will rear its head once more and, to your horror, will proclaim, with trumpets blazing: 'I was, I am, I will be!' □□□

*[Source: Marx Laboratory]*