

“Another Luxemburgism is Possible: Reflections on
Rosa and the Radical Socialist Project”

by

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With her assassination on 15 January 1919, Rosa Luxemburg¹ left a void not only on the German Left² but, indeed, throughout the international movement. The destruction of what Franz Mehring had called “the best brain since Marx” meant that others less brilliant, and, more significantly, less principled would follow in her wake. As if her absence was not bad enough, those, like Stalin, who feared her even in death set up to create a monster that bore little resemblance to Luxemburg’s profound thought. This clumsy, cynical and self-serving parody on the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg and those that might dare to follow them became known as “Luxemburgism.”

In his famous letter “On Some Questions Concerning the History of Bolshevism,” published by Joseph Stalin in *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia*³, Stalin asserted that Luxemburg was a leader of German Social Democracy who developed a “Luxemburgism” that was a type of counterrevolutionary Menshevism. Later Martinov joined with Stalin in attacking Luxemburg’s “semi-Menshevik mistakes.”⁴ As Prof. Sobhanlal Datta Gupta notes, it was not possible to realize the full impact of this assault by Stalin until the opening of the Soviet and Comintern archives. Now the full fury of this attack on Rosa’s legacy and thought is clearly revealed.⁵ Much as had been the case of Trotsky, Stalin and his minions intended to so blacken Rosa Luxemburg’s reputation so that even dead she would pose no threat to the new Stalinist orthodoxy.

To be sure, Rosa and even “Luxemburgism” had their defenders. In 1940 her old comrade Paul Frolich wrote a touching biography of her that challenged the accepted Stalinist version⁶. Stalin’s great rival Leon Trotsky wrote a biting defense called “Hands Off Rosa Luxemburg!”⁷ Still, even Trotsky could not resist the temptation to later denounce attempts to build a Luxemburgist movement in France. The old Bolshevik thundered, “The weak sides of Rosa Luxemburg’s teachings have been laid bare both

¹The most complete biography in English remains: J.P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 2 volumes, London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966.

²To examine this point more fully, see, for example, the classic: Pierre Broue, *The German Revolution, 1917-1923*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2006.

³J.V. Stalin, *Works*, Vol. 13, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1955: 102.

⁴A. Martinov, “Lenin, Luxemburg, Liebknecht,” *The Communist International*, 10.3-4 (1933): 140-142.

⁵Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India, 1919-1943: Dialectics of Real and A Possible History*, Kolkata (India):Seribaan: 33-34.

⁶Paul Frolich, *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Work*, New York: Howard Fertig, 1969.

⁷Leon Trotsky, “Hands Off Rosa Luxemburg!” *The Militant* (New York) August 6 & 13, 1932.

theoretically and practically.”⁸ Throughout the Weimar Republic and into the dark days of Hitler Fascism, the German Communist Party (KPD) increasingly clung to the Stalinist line condemning the founder of their party. After Stalin’s 1931 letter, which was quickly translated into German, KPD leaders like Ernst Thaelman would routinely give speech after speech denouncing Luxemburg and Trotsky as twin devils haunting the revolutionary workers’ movement. One KPD spokesman warned that Luxemburgism was a weapon of counter revolution different “only formally from the social-fascist theoreticians.”⁹

With the defeat of Nazism and the establishment of the German Democratic Republic (DDR) in what had been the Soviet zone of occupation, one would have hoped for a more positive reevaluation of Rosa Luxemburg and her theories. This was not to be, as the new ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) closely adhered to the received Stalinist “wisdom.” An official biography of Luxemburg issued in 1951, while praising her dedication to the cause of the workers, insisted that “great were her mistakes and errors that diverted the German working class in the wrong direction. Above all, we must not close our eyes to the fact that it was not just a question of a few mistakes, but an entire system of incorrect positions (“Luxemburgism”). These positions were one of the decisive reasons for the defeat of the German Communist Party after its establishment . . .”¹⁰

Even after de-Stalinization had come to the DDR, Luxemburg remained suspect to the SED hierarchy. Thus, although Lenin had argued for the publication of Rosa’s complete work in all the major languages of the planet immediately after her death, the first *Gesammelte Werke* of Rosa Luxemburg appeared in the DDR only in 1970. Moreover, the *Gesammelte Werke* are far from complete, including little of her writings on the national question, much less letters held in the archives of the USSR or the DDR. No real attempt was made to translate Rosa into other major languages despite the half-century old plea by Lenin. Still, in apparently unintended irony, an East German military unit was named after the fiercely antiwar Rosa in the 1970s.¹¹

In the immediate postwar West, Luxemburg was published, if she was published at all, mainly as a weapon against Lenin and by implication the competing social system of the Soviet Union. As she was “discovered” by the New Left of the later 1960s and 1970s, she began to be judged on her own merits, although a strong anticommunist aftertaste often continued to attach to the presentation of her work. For example, the University of Michigan published Rosa’s writings on “The Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy” and “The Russian Revolution” in a book entitled *The*

⁸Leon Trotsky, “Luxemburg and the Fourth International,” *New Internationalist*, August 1935.

⁹Kurt Sauerland, *Der dialektische Materialismus*, Berlin: Neuer Deutscher Verlag, 1932: 133.

¹⁰Fred Olssner, *Rosa Luxemburg*, Berlin [DDR]: Dietz Verlag, 1951: 7.

¹¹*Daily World*, July 29, 1976: 7.

Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism¹². In the competition between West Germany¹³ and the DDR, both nations honored Rosa Luxemburg by having her picture on a postage stamp. But, as one joke went at the time, the stamps may have been issued just so both Stalinists and Capitalists could spit on Rosa when sending their mail.¹⁴ With the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, passions have cooled and once again it may be possible to study Luxemburg for her own sake. Much valuable work has already been accomplished toward this goal of revisiting Rosa and non-revisionist Luxemburgism, as shown by the wonderful gatherings organized by the International Rosa Luxemburg Society. Still, much remains to be done to restore Rosa Luxemburg to her rightful place as an original thinker and an ethical revolutionary. This paper is a modest contribution to that effort.

This paper will argue that a new appreciation of Rosa, “another Luxemburgism,” true to Rosa’s principles and free of Stalinist revisionism, might develop from certain key aspects of her work. Among the tenants that cry out for inclusion in such a list, I will focus on five: 1) steadfast belief in democracy; 2) complete faith in the common people (the masses); 3) dedication to internationalism in word and deed; 4) commitment to a democratic revolutionary party; and 5) unshakable practice of humanism. There are, of course, many more areas of her thought which hold vital clues for those who would follow her in the twenty-first century.¹⁵ For reasons of time, I will limit my discussion to the above-mentioned five points.

Democracy is a word much thrown around in the world today, too often by those who have no true interest in democracy for the mass of humanity. Luxemburg rejected the notion of democracy in the bourgeois tradition--a passive populace choosing from a limited offering of competing elites. For her, democracy, real democracy, was active involvement of the masses in all aspects of society’s operation. It was the view of Luxemburg that “the more democratic the institutions, the livelier and stronger the pulse-beat of the political life of the masses, the more direct and complete is their influence. . .”¹⁶ In other words, a complete democracy as hinted at by the experience of the Paris Commune.¹⁷ She had sympathy neither for the arguments of parliamentary

¹²*The Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970. See also: Bertram D. Wolfe, “Rosa Luxemburg and V.I. Lenin: The Opposite Poles of Revolutionary Socialism,” *Antioch Review*, 21 (Summer, 1961): 209-226.

¹³This action was not taken without dissent from the right, see: *The Sunday Times* (London), March 17, 1974: 8.

¹⁴This joke was told to me by a member of the DDR Embassy staff assigned to Washington, D.C. and, separately, by a Party member I met during a visit to East Berlin.

¹⁵See, for example: “Writings on Women, 1902-1914” in Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004: 232-245.

¹⁶*The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*: 302.

¹⁷See: Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (various editions)

“socialists” who saw the common people as a passive mass of votes¹⁸ nor for the excessive centralism practiced by the Russian Bolsheviks.¹⁹ Rosa would have agreed with Bertolt Brecht when he criticized the secretary of the East German Writers Union, who after the 1953 workers revolt:

Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?²⁰

Secondly, we have noted her faith in the masses. This is related to, but distinct from, her democratic beliefs. Rosa thought that working people were capable of rising above their day-to-day problems and preoccupations to create a truly revolutionary movement that would lead to a fundamental transformation of society. Whereas other “socialists” blamed the people for their failures, Luxemburg felt that the masses would ultimately prove wiser than their self-appointed saviors. Her oft quoted conclusion to her critique of Russian party organization written before World War I deserves to be remembered here: “[L]et us speak frankly between ourselves: the mistakes that are made by a truly revolutionary worker’s movement are, historically speaking, immeasurably more fruitful and more valuable than the infallibility of the best possible ‘Central Committee.’”²¹

Thirdly, one must recognize the internationalism of Rosa Luxemburg. She knew that nationalism was an illusion that played most often into the hands of reaction. As opposed to others like Lenin, who sought to find “progressive nationalism,” Luxemburg understood that pride in one’s nation is easily and typically manipulated into scorn for other cultures. Her original work on Poland proved that it could never truly be independent because it lacked the necessary economic basis.²² This insight applies to more nations than not in our era of globalization. Still, her views were far from

¹⁸She argued these people announced a different path to socialism but she contends, in *Social Reform or Revolution*, that they really have chosen a different goal. *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*: 157-158.

¹⁹Ottokar Luban, “Rosa Luxemburg’s Criticism of Lenin’s Ultra Centralistic Concept of the Party in the Socialist Movement,” paper presented to International Rosa Luxemburg conference, Wuhan, China, 20-21 March 2006.

²⁰Bertolt Brecht, “The Solution” poem written after 1953 workers uprising in Berlin.

²¹*The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*:265.

²²Rosa Luxemburg, *The Industrial Development of Poland*, New York: University Editions, 1979.

unsympathetic to nations and peoples oppressed by others, as she believed that their ultimate salvation lay in international, not national, liberation.²³ Rosa knew that imperialism was not merely a choice for advanced capitalist economies but rather an economic necessity. Furthermore, imperialism would continue not only against nations but also against underdeveloped internal communities within the nation.²⁴ To combat these evils, the appropriate tool is international solidarity. In many ways, one could call the World Social Forums an inherently Luxemburgist project in their stress on internationalism and democracy.

The fourth component of Luxemburgism is her view of the revolutionary party. As noted previously, Rosa Luxemburg was a committed democrat with a deep faith in the masses of common people. As she wrote in "What Does Spartakus Want?": we "will never take over governmental power except in response to the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian masses of all of Germany, never except by the proletariat's conscious affirmation of the views, aims and methods of struggle of the Spartacus League."²⁵ These beliefs prevented her from adopting Lenin's ultra centrist form of the Party.²⁶ For her, socialism--true socialism--could only be achieved with the full mobilization of the workers as active actors in their own liberation. While uncompromising in her opposition to capitalism and all forms of exploitation, Rosa was creative and far removed from the dogmatic drones who came to dominate European communism in the decades after her death. The Party, for Rosa Luxemburg, was to be neither a substitute for the working masses nor a electoral machine using the common people as passive markers of ballots. Rather, it was a creative, evolving interaction between "leaders" and "followers."

The fifth and final tenet of "Luxemburgism" to be covered is humanism. Luxemburg had a profound belief in human dignity as the moral basis of socialism. She saw socialism as more than a quantitative improvement in the human condition but also as a liberation of humans from the realm of necessity and into a realm of freedom. Whereas the bourgeois leaders, like former British PM Thatcher say, "There is no such thing as society,"²⁷ Rosa saw society as a uniquely human enterprise that may transcend mere physical necessity to achieve a fulfillment of the spirit. It would not be imposed or alien to the people. Luxemburg argued that previous revolutions relied on violence precisely because they were led by and for privileged minorities. By contrast, "the proletarian revolution requires no terror for its aims; it hates and despises killing. It does not need these weapons because it does not combat individuals but

²³Horace B. Davis, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg on the National Question: Selected Writings*, New York: Monthly Review, 1976.

²⁴Anthony Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A Critical Survey*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982: 61-76.

²⁵*The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*:356-357.

²⁶See: Ottokar Luban's paper cited above.

²⁷Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, talking to *Women's Own*, October 31, 1987.

institutions . . . It is not the desperate attempt of a minority to mold the world forcibly according to its ideal.”²⁸

Writing in *Die Rote Fahne* on 18 November 1918, Rosa pointed out that the revolution has “A Duty of Honor.” This article stressed the human side of revolution and demanded an immediate end to capital punishment. Luxemburg concluded: “Ruthless revolutionary energy and tender humanity - this alone is the true essence of socialism. One world must now be destroyed, but each tear that might have been avoided is an indictment; and a man who hurrying on to important deeds inadvertently tramples underfoot even a poor worm, is guilty of a crime.”²⁹ Socialism was always for Rosa the opening up of a wider world of beauty, culture and science for all people. It was a noble goal for Rosa in the 20th century and remains a worthy goal for us in 21st century. Maybe now after the collapse of the Stalinist Soviet bloc, it is time for a re-birth of Luxemburgism.

²⁸*The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*: 352.

²⁹*Die Rote Fahne*, 18 November, 1918.