

# **Rosa Luxemburg's concept of Democracy**

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## **Introduction**

Rosa Luxemburg was one of the most prestigious figures with whom social democracy counted on during the two first decades of the XXth century.

If there is something that we should point out among her numerous qualities, it is the clarity with which she could apply Marx' and Engels' method –'dialectic materialism'- in all her analysis.

According to what Marx prescribed in his '*Thesis about Feuerbach*', Rosa Luxemburg was not satisfied with doing a theoretic study of reality; on the contrary she always fought to change it.

Her active involvement in the different revolutionary movements of the beginnings of the century, made the prisons in her native Poland and Germany, her adoptive nation, have her as a usual 'host'.

She was a strong defender of the democratic system, and an inexhaustible polemicist. Being always true to her convictions led her to having tough encounters with the most brilliant intellectuals of her time, such as Lenin, Kautsky, Bernstein, Otto Bauer, or Pannekoek.

Nowadays, after the destruction of the soviet experience, when plenty of right critics announce the death of Marxism and many sectors of the left can not find their path, we believe recovering the thought of an intellectual and active participant who knew how to be ahead of her time is more than essential.

As she herself assumes in 1903: *'If we discover a stop in our movement, in what refers to all its theoretic applications, that is not because the theory on which it is based, Marxism, is unable to develop or is restricted. On the contrary, it is due to the fact that we have not learnt to apply appropriately the most important intellectual weapons taken from Marxism by virtue of our pressing requirements in the first stages of our struggle. It is not true that, in what refers to our practical fight, Marx has resigned or been overcome by us. In contrast, Marx, in his scientific conception, has gained distance as a fighters' political party. It is not true that Marx has stopped satisfying our needs. On the*

*contrary, our needs still do not adequate themselves to the application of Marxists thoughts.'*<sup>1</sup>

Considering this we will try to analyze her understanding of democracy, and the role that, according to her, any Social democrat, who boasts him or herself of being such, must perform.

### **The democratic model**

Rosa Luxemburg was a worthy heir of the democratic tradition defended by the European social democracy. Nevertheless, this did not prevent her from having a clear notion of the limits imposed by the bourgeois democracy and the need to modify it and go beyond it.

In her paper *'Reform or Revolution'*, from 1900, which main aim was to criticize Bernsteins' position and his revisionism, our author explained the superstructural aspect of democracy as a political form.

*'Between democracy and the capitalist development there is no chance to appreciate any relation, neither general nor absolute. Politics shape is, always, the result of inner and external political factors, and allows, within its boundaries, the full range of political regimes, from the absolutist monarchy to the democratic republic.'*<sup>2</sup>

She understood that capitalism, as a social and economic structure, used democracy as a political form, but did not depend on it.

She pointed out that democracy had played a main role in the transition from the *feudal state* to *capitalism*, destroying the bourgeoisie inconvenients to develop.

With the same clarity she could see that *'...as soon as democracy shows the tendency to forget its classicist characteristic, becoming a tool for people's interests, bourgeoisie itself and its state representation sacrifices democratic procedures...'*<sup>3</sup>

Then she added that *'...liberalism as such, has become worthless at a point for the bourgeois society, and in some very important aspects, even an obstacle. (...) The degree of development reached by global economy, and the aggravation of the fights due to the competition in the world market, have made militarism become an instrument of the global policy, being that what characterizes the present moment in the internal*

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<sup>1</sup> Luxemburg, Rosa (1903), *Estancamiento y crisis del Marxismo*, in "Rosa Luxemburgo, Obras Escogidas"; Argentina, 1976; TI, page 135.

<sup>2</sup> Luxemburg, Rosa (1900), *Reforma o Revolución*; Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1969; page 89.

<sup>3</sup> Luxemburg, Rosa (1900); Ob.cit.; page 58.

*and external politics of the big states. But if global politics and militarism are a growing tendency nowadays, logically democracy should walk to its dusk.’*<sup>4</sup>

And, evidently, *bourgeois* democracy, walked to its sunset. Her murder in 1919 would not allow her to witness regimes that, like Fascism and Nazism, she knew to predict.

As the Spanish professor, Elías Díaz, greatly knew to explain:

*‘The bourgeoisie, which was liberal and had organized itself according to the principles of individualism and abstentionism for the conquest and protection of its interests and privilege, changes these bases for others, not liberal but totalitarian, when those happen to be insufficient for the defense of the capitalist system, that is what they really care to preserve. Meanwhile there was no danger, capitalism was liberal; when socialism appears, the laissez faire is no longer useful to the bourgeoisie; capitalism can not be liberal anymore without putting in danger the interests and privileges that it represents. Where the pressure and tension of classes are less it will be able to continue being liberal; but, where for various causes the tensions intensify, the bourgeoisie leaves the liberal formalism with which it had served until then and does not hesitate in organizing the defense of capitalism with a totalitarian approach. This is, basically, Fascism: totalitarian organized capitalism; economic capitalism plus political totalitarianism’.*<sup>5</sup>

That is why Rosa Luxemburg believed in the need to defend the system and the democratic institutions.

She kept on saying, in ‘Reform or Revolution’, that:

*‘If democracy is, for the bourgeoisie, partly valueless, and partly even an obstacle, for the working class it is necessary and indispensable. And it is so, firstly, because it builds political shapes (autonomy, vote, etc.) that function as beginning and foundations for the popular class in its transformation of bourgeois society. And, secondly, it is essential because only in it, in the fight for democracy, in the practice of its rights, the proletariat can reach the real knowledge of its interests of class and its historical assignments’.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Luxemburg, Rosa (1900); Ob.cit.; page 90.

<sup>5</sup> Díaz, Elías (1966); *Estado de Derecho y Sociedad Democrática*; España, 1984; page 44.

<sup>6</sup> Luxemburg, Rosa (1900); Ob.cit.; page 99/100.

Being a bourgeois creation, democracy had become a tool that could and should be used by the raising working class. Not only to reach power, as those who defended the *legal way*, but also as a way to educate this class, allowing it to go from class itself to class for itself.

### **Social Democracy and Dictatorship of the Proletariat**

Rosa Luxemburgo was convinced of being a faithful exponent of the socialist democratic tradition initiated by Marx and Engels. From there appears the work "*Theory and practice*"; of 1910, where she reproduces Engels' words in the "*Contribution to the critic of the project of the social democrat program of 1891*": Engels said:

*'If there is something sure it is that our political party and the working class can only reach power through the democratic republic. This is even the precise form for the dictatorship of the proletariat as the great French revolution has already shown us.'*<sup>7</sup>

When talking about the dictatorship of the proletariat as the specific shape of the democratic republic, Engels uses 1871 Paris' Commune as an example. What leads us to believe that it is good to remember briefly that experience.

Engels himself, in the *Introduction to the classes' struggle in France*, tells us that all the members of the Commune were *workers or representatives known by the workers*. Every administrative, law or teaching related public office was filled through vote, applying for that the *universal suffrage* and the right of *revocation*. Equal salaries were established for government officials and workers, trying by this to avoid the arrivistes and the hunting of posts.

The understanding of the *dictatorship of the proletariat* will, then, be another spot of conflict in their battle against bolsheviks'.

A conflict which origins go back to 1904, when Rosa Luxemburg wrote the article *Organizational problems of Socialdemocracy*, criticizing the position adopted by Lenin in his works '*What to do?*', and '*One step forward, two steps backwards*'. There, Lenin championed party centralization when decision taking was required and in the coordination of the revolutionary process. We will go back to this matter when we deal with the role of the party for Rosa Luxemburg.

In what refers to the relation between democracy and dictatorship, Rosa would say, in 1918, that:

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<sup>7</sup> Luxemburg, Rosa (1910); *Teoría y Práxis*; in 'Debate sobre la Huelga de masas. Primera Parte.', Copybooks of the Past and Present; Mexico, 1978; page 235.

*‘The main mistake of the Lenin and Trotsky Theory is precisely to oppose exactly like Kautsky did, dictatorship to democracy. “Dictatorship or democracy”, that is how the matter is presented by the bolsheviks as well as by Kautsky. The last one, naturally, opts for democracy and more specifically for bourgeois democracy, placing it as the alternative to the socialist subversion. Lenin and Trotsky, on the contrary, adopt a dictatorship in opposition to democracy and, as a consequence for the dictatorship of a reduced group of people, in other words, a dictatorship according to the bourgeois model. It is the opposition of two poles, both pretty far from the authentic socialist politic.*

*(...) Socialist democracy begins together with the demolition of class domain and the construction of socialism. It starts in the exact moment when the socialist party gains power; being this, nothing else but the dictatorship of the proletariat.*

*Yes, yes: dictatorship! But this dictatorship consists in the system of democracy application, not in its abolition...’<sup>8</sup>*

The *dictatorship of the proletariat*, according to our author, is the beginning of the construction of the socialist democracy. A democracy which content will go beyond bourgeois democracy, since the fight of classes would be ended, opening the way for a *non-classicist society*. The so many times longed *kingdom of freedom*.

Although it is true that Kautsky describes the ideas of dictatorship and democracy as alternative ones, it is not less true that our author used to share various aspects with his vision of democracy.

Let’s see, for instance, some phrases from Kautsky in his paper *‘Dictatorship of the proletariat’*, of 1918. In it he said:

*‘Socialism as a means to the emancipation of the proletariat, without democracy, is unthinkable (...) Socialism without democracy is unthinkable’*

*‘Democracy is the essential basis for building up a Socialist System of production’.<sup>9</sup>*

But, until Socialist Democracy had not been accomplished, Rosa Luxemburg thought that formal democracy, as bourgeois democracy used to be called, should be defended and preserved.

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<sup>8</sup> Luxemburg, Rosa (1918); *Crítica de la Revolución Rusa*; Argentina; page 126/128.

<sup>9</sup> Kautsky, Karl (1918); *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*; in [www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1918](http://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1918) ; chapter II and V.

Then, she said: ‘... ‘As Marxists we were never formal democracy fans’, Trotsky writes. *It is true; we were never formal democracy fans. Anyhow we were not, in anyway, socialism or Marxism fans. Does this mean that we have the right (...) of throwing socialism or Marxism to the bin when they make us uncomfortable? Trotsky and Lenin represent the vivid denial of this chance. We were never formal democracy fans, means that: we have always distinguished the social content of the politic shape of the bourgeois democracy, we always knew how to disclose the bitter seed of the inequality of the social subjugation that hides inside the sweet shell of equality and of formal freedom, not to reject them, but to incite the working class not to attain just to the package, to conquer political power to fill it with a new social content. The historical mission of the proletariat, once the power is gained, is to create, instead of the bourgeois democracy a socialist democracy and not to abolish all democracy.*’<sup>10</sup>

As we can see up to here, the defense of the democratic model carried out is permanent. Formal democracy is a step, a tool to go for the search of a democracy with social content. Socialist democracy.

In some way her criticism towards bourgeois democracy allows us to think in its substitution for a regime that restricts formal freedom.

Bourgeois democracy is beaten with more democracy. The insufficiency of bourgeois freedoms is completed in the socialist democracy, where liberty is extended when a true equality is reached.

And which are the main values that integrate the democratic model she defends?

Freedom of press, of assembly and of association; a strong and free public opinion; a complete freedom of conscience for all individuals and open tolerance for the different beliefs and opinions; unlimited political freedom and constant education to the masses; periodic elections under the universal suffrage.

She declared that ‘*It is a notorious and unanswerable fact that, without an unlimited freedom of press, without a free life of association and reunion, it is completely impossible to allow the domain of the big popular masses*’.<sup>11</sup>

(...) ‘*Without general elections, freedom of press and unlimited reunion, free exchange of opinion in every public institution, life extinguishes, becomes apparent and the only active thing left is burocracy*’.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Luxemburg, Rosa (1918); Ob.cit.; page 127.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem; page 118.

She placed liberty back on stage again. Without freedom there is no democracy.

The polemic she maintained with the bolsheviks' serves, as well, to distinguish the purity of her conception of liberty.

She insisted that:

*'Liberty only for those who support the government, just for those who are party members – no matter how numerous they are- is not freedom. Freedom is always only liberty for those who thinks differently. This is not because of "justice" fanaticism, but because all that can be instructive, healthy and purifying in political freedom depends on it, and loses all efficacy when "liberty" becomes a privilege'.<sup>13</sup>*

If we were consistent with her thoughts, it would be impossible to accept the qualification of Socialism or Real Socialism, for those forms of social organization based on the authority of the Single Party.

### **Spontaneity, masses and organization**

The relation between masses and the Party was a subject of permanent preoccupation in Rosa Luxemburg's thought. We consider it to be closely related to her integral vision of democracy and freedom.

She took as a main point of reference Marx's words in the General Statutes of the International Association of Workers, who said:

*'... that the working class emancipation must be accomplished by the workers themselves; that the fight for the emancipation of the working class is not a fight for privileges and classes monopolies, but a fight for the establishment of rights and equal duties and for the abolition of all classes domination...'<sup>14</sup>*

Rosa's constant appeal to the masses and their spontaneity, made her known as the theorist of revolutionary spontaneity, being object of harsh criticism during the Stalinist period, and mainly vindicated during the French March of '68.

We understand, anyway, that it is a mistake to recognize Rosa Luxemburg's position as an attack to the *Political Party*. Her attack is against the *Partyocracy* and *burocratic centralism*.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem; page 123.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem; page 119.

<sup>14</sup> Marx, Carlos (1871); *General Status of the Worker's International Assosiation*; in 'Marx-Engels, Obras Escogidas'; Editorial Progreso, Moscú, 1955; TI, page 363.

What is more, we do not even share the vision of those that point out an apparent *ambiguity* or *confusion* in her speech<sup>15</sup>, which would oscillate between her support to the Party, of which she was always an active member, and her insistent defense to spontaneity.

The Socialdemocratic Party was considered part of the working class, and as such, Rosa Luxemburg awarded it a very special role.

Trotsky himself would recognize in 1935 that: *'At a much earlier date than Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg grasped the retarding character of the ossified party and trade-union apparatus and began a struggle against it. In as much as she counted upon the inevitable accentuation of class conflicts, she always predicted the certainty of the independent elemental appearance of the masses against the will and against the line of march of officialdom. In these broad historical outlines, Rosa was proved right.*

*(...) Rosa never confined herself to the mere theory of spontaneity (...) Rosa Luxemburg exerted herself to educate the revolutionary wing of the proletariat in the advance and to bring it together organizationally as far as possible.'*<sup>16</sup>

Regarding this, we would like to point out her accurate application of historic materialism, and the comprehension of the inevitability of the *collapse of capitalism*. *Inevitability* that should not be misunderstood as *fatalism*.

She says in *Theory and Praxis*, of 1910:

*'Evidently our cause goes ahead despite all this. The enemies work in it so tirelessly that it does not result any special merit that our seed matures in any condition. But finally this is not the duty of the proletarian party: to live only of the sins and mistakes of its adversaries and in spite of its own ones. It is about, on the contrary, of speeding up the course of actions by its own activity, bringing about not the minimum but the maximum of action and the classes struggle at every moment.'*<sup>17</sup>

The Party must perform an active role in the mobilization of the proletariat.

She says in *Masses' Strike, Parties and Syndicates*, of 1906:

*'If the socialdemocrats, as an organized group of the working class, are the most important vanguard of the workers group, and if the political clarity, the strength and unity of the proletarian movement come from that organization, the class mobilization*

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<sup>15</sup> We recommended to see Daniel Guèrin's work *Rosa Luxemburgo o la espontaneidad revolucionaria*; Argentina, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Trotsky, León (1935); Luxemburg and the IV Internacional; in [www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky](http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky)

<sup>17</sup> Luxemburg, Rosa (1910); Ob.cit.; page 273.

*of the proletariat can not be conceived as a mobilization of an organized minority. All really big struggles of classes must be based on the support and collaboration of the widest masses. A strategy for the struggle of classes that does not count with this support, that is based on a march set on stage by the little well trained sector of the proletariat, is destined to end in a miserable failure.'*<sup>18</sup>

We consider that it is possible to find the central axis of Rosa Luxemburg's argumentation. Her criticism is directed to the lack of *democracy* that would imply a *Party* which direction is separated from the *mass*.

The article *Organizational Issues of the Socialdemocracy*, of 1904, results really clarifying in that sense.

Lets pay attention to her words.

*'...Socialdemocrat centralism can not be based on the mechanic subordination and the blind obedience of the militants towards those directing it. That is why the socialdemocratic movement can not allow a hermetic wall to be raised between the conscious nucleus of the proletariat that is already in the party and its popular surroundings, the sectors of the proletariat without a party.*

*Lenin's centralism lays precisely in these two principles: 1) Blind subordination, even up to the smallest detail, of all the organizations in the centre, that is the only one that decides, thinks and guides. 2) Rigorous separation of the nucleus of organized revolutionaries from their revolutionary social environment.*

*(...)It is a fact that socialdemocracy is not connected with the proletariat. It is the proletariat.*

*(...) The indispensable conditions for the implantation of the socialdemocrat centralism are: 1)the existence of a huge contingent of workers educated in the politic fight, 2) the possibility that the workers develop their political activity through the direct influence in the public life, in the press of the party, in public congresses, etcetera.*

*(...) The socialist centralism is not an absolute factor applicable in any stage of the proletarian movement. It is a tendency, which becomes real in proportion to the development and politic education acquired by the working class during their struggle.'*<sup>19</sup>

The differences between them are evident.

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<sup>18</sup> Luxemburg, Rosa (1906); *Masses' Strike, Parties and Syndicates*. Ob.cit.;TI, page 235.

<sup>19</sup> Luxemburg, Rosa (1904); *Problemas organizativos de la Socialdemocracia*; in RL *Obras Escogidas*; TI; pages 141 and following.

Rosa Luxemburg did not ignore the importance of the so called *socialdemocrat centralism*, but understood that it was a result of the evolution of the proletariat movement. A *tendency* that gives a genuine and direct participation, with real capacity of decision of all the proletariat, not just of a *group of enlightened intellectuals* that act in their name and representation.

That is why, when in 1918 she refers again to the conditions for the construction of the socialist democracy, the dictatorship of the proletariat, she would say:

*'...This dictatorship must be accomplished by the whole class and not by a minority of leaders in the name of the class, it is worth saying, it must go after the active participation of the masses, be under their direct influence, commit to the control of a full publicity, emerge from the accelerated political instruction of the popular masses.'*<sup>20</sup>

Considering the deep crisis through which the Political Party System in general is currently undergoing, and the Socialdemocracy in particular, Rosa Luxemburg's words gain a dimension that we should revalue.

As Georg Lukàcs well used to say, in 1921:

*'...It is not due to luck that Rosa Luxemburg, who previously and with greater clarity than many others, recognized the essential spontaneous character of the actions of the revolutionary masses, saw with equal clarity, also before many others, which is the role of the party in the revolution. (...) Rosa Luxemburg early understood that the organization is much more a consequence than a previous condition of the revolutionary process, in the same way that the proletariat can not become a class if not within and through that process. In such process, that the party can neither provoke nor avoid, it has, the role then of being the carrier of the proletarian class consciousness, the consciousness of its historical mission. (...) Rosa Luxemburg's conception is the source of the true revolutionary activity.'*

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<sup>20</sup> Luxemburg, Rosa (1918); Ob.cit.; page 128