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Rosa Luxemburg

A Revolutionary Marxist at the Limits of Marxism

Michael Brie · Jörn Schütrumpf

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Communism […] – to hell with the reality of it, but may God save it as a constant threat to the propertied classes. God save communism so that the cheeky riff-raff does not grow even cheekier, so that the society of those with the exclusive license for hedonism […] may at least go to bed with heartburn! So that they shall at least no longer feel like preaching morals to their victims and shall cease making jokes at their expense.

Karl Kraus

… to banish parties as parties, as tendencies, from the surface by police-measures, to remove them from the light of day, was, for Rosa Luxemburg, an impossible idea: not for the sake of the reformists, but for that of the revolution and the revolutionaries themselves, who can also triumph inwardly only if they combat mistakes freely. For the experience that revolutionaries gain from the struggle against reformism cannot be replaced by any leader, police-force or Cheka. They have to gain this experience in their own struggle.

Paul Levi

Preface—Memories for the Future

The political left has only rarely managed to convey its abstract ideas of freedom and emancipation of the individual, and of society as a whole, in such a way that less politicised people could relate to them, and indeed be drawn towards them. The left has often tried to compensate for this by having freedom fighters from the distant past attest to its good intentions. Let us remember Spartacus—who in 1916, quite by chance, became the figurehead of the revolutionary movement led by Rosa Luxemburg, Leo Jogiches, Franz Mehring and Karl Liebknecht[1]—the Brothers Gracchus, Thomas Müntzer, Tommaso Campanella, Jacques Roux, Gracchus Babeuf, Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, Friedrich Engels, Mikhail Bakunin, Ferdinand Lassalle and Peter Kropotkin. Later, figures such as August Bebel, Clara Zetkin, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Augusto Sandino, Karl Liebknecht, Leon Trotsky, Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-tung,

[1] Spartakusgruppe (Spartacus League): Formed as Gruppe Internationale on 2nd January 1915 on the initiative of Rosa Luxemburg and the historian of the labour movement Franz Mehring, in protest against the SPD's support of the war. Soon the name Spartakusgruppe became common, following the publication of the 'Spartakusbriefe' (Spartacus Letters) by the Gruppe Internationale. Its members were systematically persecuted because of their illegal propagandist work and its leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, imprisoned. Renamed the Spartacus League on 9 November 1918 and possessing organisational independence, the group became—alongside the International Communists of Germany—the organisational and political core of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), which then took over the leadership of the Spartacus League.

Patrice Lumumba, Ho Chi Minh and Frantz Fanon were also invoked. At demonstrations nowadays, however, wherever they take place, these figures are almost always conspicuously absent—with a few exceptions. One German Jew from Trier is ever-present, yet so ubiquitous that he is often forgotten: Karl Marx. Alongside Marx, there are three other individuals whose images are also consistently displayed: a Polish Jew who was heinously murdered in Germany, an Argentinean whose killers caught up with him in Bolivia in 1967 and an Italian who was finally released from prison by the Fascists in 1937 after years of incarceration—only to die shortly thereafter. These three people are Rosa Luxemburg, Ernesto Che Guevara and Antonio Gramsci, all of whom embody not only the rare unity of word and action, but also an independence of thought that refused to be made subordinate to any doctrine or apparatus. All three also paid for their convictions with their lives, although they were murdered by their enemies rather than by those from their own camp, as was so often the case in the twentieth century.

Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci also have something else in common: they never had to exercise state power themselves, nor were they obliged to tarnish their names by participating in a dictatorial or totalitarian regime. Luxemburg, a long-time Social Democrat who went on to become a co-founder of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), did not live to see the rise of Stalin; in January 1919, she was pistol-whipped and then executed with a shot to the back. Gramsci, another Social Democrat turned Communist, who himself went on to help found the Italian Communist Party, was imprisoned in Italy from 1928 until he fell chronically ill. Of the three only Ernesto Che Guevara participated in government, in revolutionary Cuba, although ever the partisan, he was not to remain there for long.

Up to this day, Guevara continues to inspire the youth, while Gramsci has consistently retained an appeal for intellectuals. When it comes to Rosa Luxemburg, however, most are only familiar with her name and fate, but not with her thought and work—or if they are familiar with these, then mostly only as caricatures.

The socialism of the twentieth century, fraught as it is with backstabbing, betrayal, humiliations, subordinations, torture and murder, weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living, but also presents opportunities that are often overlooked. Unlike during the pre-1917 period, socialism is no longer a vague idea. We now have 70 years of

practice from which we can learn not only how to persistently discredit the idea of socialism, but also what socialism certainly is not.

A nightmare, to be sure—and yet one that can be of use to those who have not yet let go of the desire to overthrow 'all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable being' (Marx 2010, 182). No matter what attitude the left takes to 70 years of practice of 'really existing socialism', the entire left remains shackled to the gulag, the Wall and barbed wire, and will continue to be for as long as it fails to grasp that nightmares can only ever be dispelled by systematically confronting their particular contents over and again. Repression does not dissipate a nightmare, it preserves it. Nor is it enough simply to know what happened—these questions were answered by historians long ago. At issue is the why and the how, not just the who, what and when.

Instead of looking to the years of power and megalomania for new yardsticks with which to evaluate every step, every decision of our own, and in this way to gradually arrive at a new conception of socialism, the left treats its forebears merely as embarrassing poorer cousins. In so doing, it fails to grasp that it wastes its only really existing opportunity—not to be absolved of the sins of the past, but to open up a route to a post-capitalist society. Cultivating historical amnesia makes us into prisoners of the past; instead of becoming the analyst, we get stuck in the position of the patient.

The socialism of the twentieth century has been used by every political tendency but one: the left. That's why the left is the only tendency with an interest in taking society, which remains stuck in the twentieth century, and finally leading it into the twenty-first century. Not least among the prerequisites for doing so is the rediscovery of virtues that torture chambers and stage-managed party conferences deprived of all meaning: honesty regarding one's own past and present actions; untrammelled thinking, even at the point where it becomes uncomfortable; integrity, even and especially in relation to opponents. Machiavellian cunning can be useful in establishing a dictatorship, but when it comes to emancipating ourselves from exploitation and oppression, it inspires no one.

None of this would have happened on Luxemburg's watch. Deriving her theories from reality and checking them against it, the little Pole from Zamość did not take long to free herself from the nightmare—we find an example of this in 1918, when she was one of the first to try to analyse the impending catastrophe in her studies of the Russian Revolution.

The present book seeks to counter the tendency to view Rosa Luxemburg through the lens of caricature. It aims to awaken an interest in her work and her person, in one of the most unique people in the history of the European left. She was a woman who refused to be treated preferentially on account of her gender, knowing that this type of behaviour only served to legitimate gender inequality. She was a thinker who strove for equality through freedom and solidarity, without subordinating one to the other. A woman with many of the qualities which today's left needs to re-learn.

In our view, the contradictory whole that is Rosa Luxemburg's work does not express its truth in this or that sentence. And its truth is a concrete truth, one that scrapes against real contradictions while being fraught with them. Luxemburg wanted to produce emancipatory agency in increasingly dark times. To this end, she struggled against helplessness and despair, indicating emergent possibilities where workers—the masses, as she referred to them—could act in their own interest, using their own insights and organically generated organisational forms to take matters into their own hands. Another part of the concrete truth of Rosa Luxemburg's work is the fact that her irrepressible will to promote solidary emancipation reveals the fetters formed by traditional intellectual, behavioural, organisational and cultural forms, while also making it clear how difficult it is to create new such forms. Her own last great effort, the founding the KPD, is a testament to this difficulty.

Rosa Luxemburg was neither a theorist in the mould of Marx, nor a party leader in that of Bebel or Lenin. Above all, her influence lay in her activity as a journalist and orator. As she elaborated at a party conference of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), 'the only violent means that will lead us to victory is the socialist enlightenment of the working class in the everyday struggle' (Luxemburg 1979, 239). Luxemburg did produce academic works, such as her dissertation and economic writings, and she was active in Polish Social Democracy as a party leader before becoming a founder of the KPD in 1918. However, the focus of her work was the written and spoken word addressed to the workers, whom she wanted to reach directly and to motivate to self-activity—to assist them in acting as the times demanded. This is also how she envisioned leadership. When she said that it is not the task of a socialist party to trigger action from the masses per command, she expressed self-understanding with the following word: 'Our duty is simply, always without fear, "to

say loudly what is" [Luxemburg repeatedly cites this saying from Ferdinand Lassalle—M.B.], or in other words, to clearly and explicitly present the masses with their tasks in the given historical moment, to proclaim the programme of political action and the solutions resulting from the situation' (Luxemburg 1974, 289).

Luxemburg's life was ended abruptly. She was the victim of a political murder at the hands of proto-fascist forces who had been let loose on the Spartacists by the right-wing leadership of the SPD. Not even 48 years old at the time, both her life and her life's work were cut short. Her search for a democratic, emancipatory, socialist alternative to imperialism, colonialism and war remained unfinished. At the moment when Social Democracy and Bolshevist Communism were dividing into two hostile camps, the socialist alternative to both poles of the labour movement lost its most important and influential protagonist.

The present study attempts to reconstruct the most significant political approaches pursued by Rosa Luxemburg. It begins with a glimpse into Luxemburg's magnum opus—her own life, shaped by her speaking of truth to change the world. Subsequently, it looks back at the retrospective on the Marxism of the Second International and its failure in World War I that Luxemburg produced from prison in 1918 during the November Revolution, which is viewed alongside her own turn towards Marxism in Switzerland almost thirty years prior. In the process, the emergence of Luxemburg's concept of revolutionary *Realpolitik* is situated in the context of the Marxism of the Second International and the politics of its parties, while it is revealed how the Russian Revolution of 1905 cast into doubt all received certainties of the day. The failed revolution would ultimately serve as a watershed, inspiring Luxemburg and others to transition to a new, more offensive strategy of mass action, which in Germany was successfully resisted by the leadership of the SPD. In the meantime, Luxemburg came to perceive of Marx's politico-economic work as too narrow to grasp the new situative context for action in the age of imperialism. She thus began to lay a new foundation for revolutionary theory, a task which would go unfinished. In doing so, she saw her biggest challenge in the politics of the victorious Bolsheviks, which she believed destroyed the basic conditions of freedom in freedom's name. With revolution afoot in the last two and a half months of her life, Rosa Luxemburg dedicated herself fully and entirely to renewing the emancipatory left. After detailing these efforts, the book concludes by outlining

several central elements in the history of the reception of Luxemburg's life and work.

Rosa Luxemburg remains a provocation above all. Her life's work is marked by her maximum determination to work through the contradictions of emancipation. With great gusto, she scrutinised all received intellectual, political and economic forms, exploring to what extent they reveal themselves as solidary means for developing 'the broadest humanity'. This was the source of her irrepressible revolutionary drive, and of her wish to always stay true to herself—to never lose or betray herself in the revolutionary 'cause'. Goethe, whom she revered, once wrote: 'Willst du ins Unendliche schreiten,/Geh nur im Endlichen nach allen Seiten' [*If you want to stride into the infinite, just pursue all sides in the finite*]. Rosa Luxemburg did this until she was stopped by murderers in German uniform. Above all, we want this book to serve as a means for readers to approach Luxemburg themselves. Given the amount of Luxemburg's writings and letters now available in English, the conditions for doing so have never been better. As signs of growing barbarism continue to amass, her commitment to a democratic socialism in which humans live in solidarity with each other and nature takes on new meaning.

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CHAPTER 1

Show Us the Miracle! Where Is Your Miracle?

So you ask me what I'm missing. As a matter of fact, life!
(Luxemburg 1982a, 159)

To Be Oneself in the World

Rosa Luxemburg was an enthusiastic botanist. She didn't simply study biology in Zurich before turning to the social sciences and humanities—no, her entire life was moulded by the force of attraction that free nature exerted upon her. Her work is shot through with metaphors of wild landscapes and of life's force (cf. Luxemburg 2016 for her wonderful herbarium). Luxemburg's visions of socialism are taken from nature—from the world of animals and plants, of mountains and unbridled rivers. And one hundred years after her death, even she herself, her thinking and activity, eludes cold classification and ossifying categorisation. She fits neither neatly into the geometrically ordered gardens of Marxist-Leninist intellectual history, nor into the quaint landscape gardens of a flattened-out liberalism. Rosa Luxemburg's legacy is like wild nature. It is unsettling because it vividly opposes all fixed rules. The legacy of Luxemburg proliferates always from the new, shattering as well the hardest sarcophagi with

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every new departure humans make from the confines of bondage.[1] Yet wherein exactly does the explosiveness of her work lie?

Many politicians can be reduced to *one* concept; Luxemburg, on the other hand, is a realm of lived contradictions. Although she carefully guarded her personal life and maintained its free spaces down to the smallest detail, this life and her political activism were but two sides of one and the same life well-lived. Luxemburg's relationship to the world and to herself cannot be separated. Time and again, she was prepared to sacrifice her life—first as a grammar school student, then in the 1905–1906 Russian Revolution, in Russian and German prisons and in the November Revolution. And she enjoyed life—the older she grew, all the more consciously and intensely. Whoever wants to understand Luxemburg must read her letters in addition to her published writings. Rather than mere supplements to her articles and books, they are on par with them. For Karl Kraus, her letters from prison were a 'document of humanity and poetry unique in the Germanophone world' (cited in Hetmann 1998, 6). Within them, the meaning of her successful life as a socialist becomes clear. The relationship between Luxemburg's political and theoretical texts on the one hand and her letters on the other reflects the tensions of her life, and whoever has failed to understand these has understood nothing of Luxemburg. Her life cannot be measured alone by her works: she did not found a state like Lenin or write a tome for the millennia like Marx's *Capital*. Her political impact remained limited, and while her economic writings are important, they are equalled by the writings of several of her Marxist contemporaries.

Yet to measure Luxemburg by the immediate effect of her work is to miss her genuine lasting importance. After all, there is something else that makes Luxemburg stand out to the great extent she does: her life itself. Luxemburg's magnum opus, not just the philosophical, was 'the exemplary life she led' (Caysa 2017, 38). Her genius expressed itself in this life, a life both highly personal and political, one filled with both practical interventions of existential consequence and theoretical reflection; the life of a gifted journalist and speaker engaged with the masses, and that of

[1] What Peter Weiss wrote is absolutely true: 'The hardened, motionless and immovable custodians of an ideology stand always on the side of the reactionary, regardless of what bloc they consider themselves a part of; their seemingly consistent, militant stance serves nothing other than the preservation of an obsolete, dead idea material' (cited in Gioia 1989, 9).

a person who would withdraw entirely into herself, into painting, music and in the world of plants and animals. Often she completely immersed herself 'from morning to evening' in writing, in painting and in botany. At those times, it was as if she were intoxicated (Luxemburg 1987a, 74). Shortly thereafter, she would dash from one mass rally to the next. These pursuits did not exist parallel to each other but rather formed the poles of intensely lived, mutually affecting contrasts. As Walter Jens wrote, Luxemburg attempted to live an existence 'in which, from private person and *zoon politikon*, a harmonious nature moulded by self-identity and an open relation to the world would result' (Jens 1995, 13). In a manner that remains exemplary, Luxemburg lived socialism as solidary-emancipatory movement in which the transformation of the world and the self is unified.

In November 1918, right after having been released from prison, Luxemburg wrote an article calling for the immediate abolition of the death penalty:

> In the four years of imperialist genocide, blood flowed in rivers and streams. Now every drop of the precious juice must be guarded with awe in crystal bowls. The most ruthless revolutionary energy and the broadest humanity – this alone is the true breath [*Odem*] of socialism. A world must be overthrown, but every tear that has been shed, even though it could be wiped off, is an indictment, and a person, who in hastening to do something important crushes a poor worm out of raw inattention, commits a crime. (Luxemburg 1918)

This dual demand of socialism to be both ruthless and humane was above all a lived self-demand. While writing about socialism, Luxemburg simultaneously wrote about herself.

The lasting radiance exuded by Rosa Luxemburg is above all the life which she enabled herself to lead—with great determination and even greater persistency. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus is reported to have said that it is human character that, as a 'daemon', determines whether humans live successful or failed lives. In what follows, *we* want to sketch the contours of how Luxemburg lived her life in order to trace her 'daemon'. This will be done with keywords, as here of all places any attempt to strive for closure is bound to fail.

Reading Luxemburg's political and theoretical writings requires penetrating the largely outdated language of the Marxism of the Second International. Many keywords no longer have a living correspondent

and need to be reconstructed. The naturalness with which she spoke of the working class or proletariat, of reform and revolution, of party and socialism, is from another time. But getting past this language allows one to unlock the lived reality behind it and discover the enduring reason for her radiance over an entire century: her empathetically sensitive relationship to the world. She searched for intimacy in everything and addressed the world intimately. The power of this form of relating to the world resulted from the strength of her own personality, from her 'soul'. In an 1899 letter to Leo Jogiches, her intimate partner, she remarked:

> It's the form of my writing that no longer satisfies me. In my 'soul' a totally new, original form is ripening that ignores all rules and conventions. It breaks them by the power of ideas and strong conviction. I want to affect people like a clap of thunder, to inflame their minds not by speechifying but with the breadth of my vision, the strength of my conviction and the power of my expression. (Luxemburg 1982b, 307)

Rosa Luxemburg was neither primarily a strategist like Lenin nor a theorist like Kautsky, neither a sceptic like Bernstein nor an organic intellectual like Gramsci. She was, rather, in an entirely Old Testament sense and yet also a very modern one, a prophet—a 'guide on the path out of the house of slaves' (Veerkamp 2013, 53).[2] She invoked the inseparable unity of freedom and equality, of self-determination and solidarity, of sympathy and intervening action. While reading Gerhart Hauptmann's *Emanuel Quint,* she encountered herself, as she wrote:

> Do you know the paintings of Christ by Hans Thoma? You'll have a similar experience of the image of Christ in this book [by Hauptmann]: the way he [Christ] walks, slender and tall, veiled in a dark-reddish glow, through fields of ripe grain, and to the left and right of his dark figure soft waves of purple flow over the silver tassels of grain. There [in that book] one issue caught my attention, among countless others, an issue that I've never seen portrayed elsewhere and one that I have felt deeply in my own life: the tragedy of a person who preaches to the crowd and who is aware that every word, the moment it leaves the mouth, is coarsened and becomes congealed in the minds of its listeners in distorted form as a caricature;

[2] In a 'search for traces'of Luxemburg's family, Krzysztof Pilawski and Holger Politt have discovered it had deep roots in the reform wing of the rabbinacy of Eastern and Middle European Jewry (Pilawski and Politt 2020).

> and on the basis of this caricature, the preacher is now nailed fast and in the end is surrounded by disciples, who rage around, shouting crudely: 'Show us the miracle! That's what you taught us. Where is your miracle?' (Luxemburg 2011a, 379–380)

Luxemburg entered into lively relationships with all that with which she could establish intimacy, with that which corresponded to herself and only with that. This is why her subjectivity and her action, her self and her work, her personality and her activities are inseparable from each other. She did not disappear behind that with which she engaged, she neither subordinated herself to it nor merged with it; rather, she lived the contradictions. She wanted to find in reality that which matched herself: the will, with head held high, to shape the world in a more humane way; the radicalness to desire complete emancipation; the love that seizes the other entirely and comes from one's innermost being; the beauty that lies in every leaf, in every birdsong, in every harmony; the idea that casts the world in a new light.[3] Whatever answered her invocation was seen by her was to her an intimate partner in conversation. Everything that did not answer her intimately was occlusive to her and was shadows of a world condemned to extinction. If something did not appear to her lively and completely true, it repelled her. Throughout her letters are comments such as the following: 'I dread interacting with humans. I want to live with just animals' (Luxemburg 1982c, 85). She did not want to lose her sense of self in her contact with the outside world (Luxemburg 1982d, 290).

And at the same time, she could display the utmost vulnerability, such as she does in a letter to her friend Hans Diefenbach (who died on the front in October 1917) from 30 March 1917:

> In the midst of my lovely, laboriously achieved state of equilibrium, last night before going to sleep I was again seized by a despair blacker than the night. And today is also another gray day, without sun – a cold east wind … I feel like a frozen bumblebee; have you ever found a bumblebee

[3] In 1919, Eduard Bernstein praised Luxemburg as a great socialist and identified a reason for her failure in her perception of the German working class: 'The proletariat that stood before her mind's eye stood and lived in her soul was derived from an abstraction that did not correspond to reality' (Bernstein 1998, 236). However, this 'proletariat 'was 'derived' above all from the real elements of democratic self-empowerment through popular movements in which Luxemburg had taken part herself.

> like that in the garden after the first frosty autumn morning, lying on its back quite cold and still as though dead, lying in the grass with its little legs drawn in and its little fur coat covered with hoarfrost? Only when the sun warms it thoroughly do the little legs slowly start to move and extend themselves, then the little body starts to turn over [getting off its back], and finally the bumblebee clumsily rises into the air with a grumbling, droning sound. I always made it my business to kneel down next to such a frozen bumblebee and waken it back to life by blowing on it with my warm breath. If only the sun would wake poor me from this deathly coldness! (Luxemburg 2011b, 384)

Luxemburg's highest principle was 'always to be myself, without any regard to the surroundings or other people'. To this, she added: 'I am an idealist and will remain one, as much in the German movement as in the Polish' (Luxemburg 2011c, 118). Within others and the world, she sought that which corresponded to her innermost being. When she spoke emphatically about socialism, about the fundamental ingenuity of humans who have set themselves in motion, about what the party needed to do, about pre-capitalist or post-capitalist societies, she captured these things always in a way that filled her with enthusiasm and resonated with her personality. And when she wrote of death in poorhouses, of the victims of colonialism and war, of a buffalo being beaten, she expressed her own suffering as well. She reflected the world and was herself reflected in the world. There were no protective or separating walls between her and the world. Out of this immediacy grew her enormous strengths—and weaknesses. It is necessary to be aware of the horizons and limits of her thought that resulted from this. Her unconditionality ran up against the real world of the conditional. The 'uniformity of her essence' was the unity of contradictions, and above all 'the unity between her boundless compassion, her deep-seated humanity and her razor-sharp mind, which penetrated everything and critically picked everything to pieces' (Roland-Holst 1937, 41).

In Zurich, Rosa Luxemburg had become a Marxist, initially not without orthodox traits. However, she was never in danger of ending up in the proverbial ivory tower. Her restless mind and her temperament, fed by a strong lust for life, saved her from this fate. Early on, she had found the appropriate vehicle for this energy in her written work: polemics. 100 years on, it can be said with certainty that Rosa Luxemburg is one of the most brilliant polemicists of world literature. Not only was she unsurpassed in her lifetime, but by virtue of their polemical features,