

# Rosa Luxemburg's Contribution to Marxism

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On the night of January 15-16, 1919, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, heroic pioneers and front line fighters of the revolution sweeping Germany and Europe, were brutally murdered by the Freikorps ? troops of the counterrevolution, brought into Berlin to crush the revolutionary workers. In this way, German imperialism showed once again that it will stop at no crime to hold on to power.

These soldiers of the counterrevolution were supported and encouraged by a leading Social Democrat, Gustav Noske, infamous for his remark: ?Someone has to become the bloodhound. I will not shirk the responsibility.? This frankly expressed the fact that the SPD, having supported the mass slaughter of the First World War, was willing afterwards to wade through a sea of blood in order to crush a revolution.

Political desecration of corpses

Like many other revolutionary fighters of the 20th century, Liebknecht and Luxemburg had to endure slander and pogrom-like incitement not only during their lifetimes. Posthumously, too, their memory was desecrated, and not only by the openly bourgeois, imperialist reaction.

The Social Democracy, which hounded Luxemburg and Liebknecht to their deaths, members of whose top party leadership actively participated in their murder, nevertheless invokes, when necessary, their "heritage" when they can no longer defend themselves against such obscenely cynical incorporation.

In a similar way, the Stalinist bureaucracy, which had already perverted Lenin's revolutionary legacy and placed the body of the strategist and leader of the October Revolution in a pharaonic mausoleum, for decades "commemorated" Rosa Luxemburg, against whose revolutionary internationalism it took up arms in the course of its bureaucratic degeneration.

Her political and theoretical contribution to Marxism, which ensures her place amongst the foremost revolutionaries of the 20th century, is the subject of this article. Given its brevity, the account can only provide an overview of her central theoretical achievements. It is intended to stimulate more intensive study of Rosa Luxemburg's work, not replace it.

This is all the more true because Luxemburg, who was born in 1871 in Zamosc, Poland, into a liberal Jewish family, during her short life, made important contributions to revolutionary Marxism in the most varied fields. She also founded and led two revolutionary parties: the "Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania" (SDKPiL) and the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), and its precursor the Spartakusbund. For years, she stood on the left wing of German Social Democracy and the Second International, fighting against an emerging reformism, but she was also one of the first to oppose the centrism of Karl Kautsky, regarded as the leading authority on Marxism after Engels' death and a figure who is presently undergoing something of a revival in the English speaking world.

Her name is inextricably linked with the struggle against Revisionism, initiated by Eduard Bernstein, with the analysis of the tendencies of the capitalist world economy (imperialism), with the programmatic development of the revolutionary left in various fields, before World War I, and with the founding of the KPD.

## The Revisionist Controversy

At the end of the 19th century, during capitalism's transition to its imperialist epoch, a period of conflicts between the great powers over markets and colonies and of the rise of monopolies and finance capital, a fundamental theoretical and programmatic debate broke out in the workers' movement about these tendencies, and what were their effects on the tactics of socialist parties.

Probably the best-known theoretician of the right wing of social democracy, Eduard Bernstein, attempted to subject Marx's entire theory and the revolutionary tactics based on it, to a fundamental revision in his work "The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy", published in 1899. In doing so, he wanted to provide a theoretical basis for what had become the everyday practice of social democracy. This had become increasingly focused on election campaigns, as well as the day-to-day activities of the trade unions, limited to piecemeal reforms.

Bernstein argued that the economic development of capitalism at the end of the 19th century, when it experienced an expansionary phase from 1896 onwards, had refuted Marx's conception of decline and breakdown of the capitalist mode of production. Nor, he argued, had the tendency toward ever-greater concentration and centralisation of capital materialised. Rather, the numbers of the intermediate classes had grown. Finally, he predicted that the development of capitalism would inevitably be accompanied by an ever greater expansion of bourgeois democracy. This would enable the workers' movement, in alliance with middle class democrats, to gradually "improve the conditions of the working class", in effect transforming society in a reformist manner rather than by a social revolution.

Luxemburg responded to this in her book "Social Reform or Revolution", a scathing critique of Bernstein and of Revisionism as a whole.

In over 100 pages, she refuted, point by point, Bernstein's theses. In doing so, she also anticipated the most important argumentation of future generations of reformists and social reformers, the Lafontaines and Gysis, the Corbyns and Tsipras', the various Eurocommunists, "democratic socialists" and other mini-Bernsteins of the 20th and 21st centuries. Thus, she summarises the consequences of the reformist theory in the following words:

?What will be the immediate result should our party change its tactical direction procedure to suit a viewpoint that wants to emphasise the immediate practical results of our struggle, that is social reforms? As soon as 'immediate results' become the principal aim of our activity, the clear-cut, irreconcilable point of view, which has meaning only in so far as it proposes to win power, will be discovered to be more and more inconvenient. The direct consequence of this will be the adoption by the party of a 'policy of compensation', in plain terms a policy of political horse trading, and an attitude of polite, diplomatic conciliation. But this attitude cannot be pursued for long. Since social reforms are and can remain only an empty shell, the logical results of such a programme must necessarily be disillusionment with social reform itself, that is, the calm harbour where Professors Schmoller and Co. have dropped anchor, having navigated the greater and lesser waters of social reform, in order finally to let everything proceed as God pleases.

"It is not true that socialism will arise automatically from the everyday struggle of the working class.

Socialism will be the consequence, firstly, of the growing contradictions of capitalist economy and, secondly, of the subjective consciousness of the working class of the unavoidability of overcoming these contradictions through a social overturn. When, in the manner of Revisionism, the first condition is denied and the second rejected, the labour movement finds itself reduced to a simple trade unionist and reformist movement. We move here in a direct line toward the total abandonment of the class standpoint."

(Luxemburg, *Social Reform or Revolution*, in *Collected Works [LGW] 1/1*, p. 402 ff. The Rosa Luxemburg Reader Monthly Review, NY 2004 p141-142)

Necessity of the revolutionary conquest of power

Luxemburg here illustrates the irreconcilable opposition between revolutionary, Marxist strategy and tactics on the one hand and reformist ones on the other. In "Social Reform or Revolution" she shows that, contrary to what Bernstein and Co. claim, imperialist capitalism does not lead more and more to democracy.

Thus, she proves that, in a superficial way, Bernstein and Co. confuse the replacement of a semi-feudal or feudal state machine in the 19th century by a modern capitalist and bureaucratic machine, with an inevitable and gradual trend to "more democracy". Rather, the general tendency of development is toward intensified and generalised competition on the world market, militarism, that is, a reactionary foreign policy. This corresponds internally, according to Luxemburg, to increasing reaction, to restrictions on bourgeois democracy.

From all this arises, for Luxemburg, the absolute necessity of adherence to the revolutionary seizure of power, the conquest of state power by the proletariat.

"In the history of bourgeois society, legal reform served to gradually strengthen the rising class until it felt ripe enough to seize political power and overturn the whole existing legal system in order to build a new one. Bernstein, railing against the conquest of political power as a Blanquist theory of violence, has the misfortune of mistaking what has been for centuries the pivot and driving force of human history for a Blanquist miscalculation. Indeed, ever since class societies have existed and the class struggle has formed the essential content of their history, the conquest of political power has always been as much the goal of all rising classes at the starting and the end point of every historical period. We see this in the long struggles of the peasantry with the money capitalists and the nobility in ancient Rome, in the struggles of the patrician classes with the bishops and of the artisan classes with the patricians in the medieval cities, in the struggles of the bourgeoisie with feudalism in modern times.

?Legislative reform and revolution are not different methods of historic development that can be chosen at the pleasure from the buffet of history, just as one chooses hot or cold sausages. Legislative reform and revolution are different moments in the development of class society. They condition and complement one another, and are at the same time reciprocally exclusive, as are the north and south poles, the bourgeoisie and proletariat.

"Every legal constitution is the product of a revolution. In the history of classes, revolution is the act of political creation, while legislation is the political flowering of the life of a society that has already come into being. Work for reform does not contain its own force independent from revolution. During every historic period, work for reforms is carried on only in the direction given to it by the impetus of the last revolution and continues as long as the impulsion from the last revolution continues to make itself felt. Or, to put it more concretely, in each historic period, work for reforms is carried on only in the framework of the social form created by the last revolution. Here is the kernel of the problem.?"

" (German *ibid.*, p. 427 f. English *ibid* p 156))

## General strike debate

The question of the relationship between reform and revolution naturally raised practical questions both in German Social Democracy and at the congresses of the Second International, founded in 1889. Here are just a few, important ones:

- ? the dispute over entry into bourgeois governments of a French Socialist Alexandre Millerand
- ? the use of the general or political mass strike
- ? the struggle for women's suffrage
- ? colonial policy
- ? the struggle against militarism and the approaching world war
- ? the right to self-determination for oppressed nations.

As can already be seen from the above questions, the disputes between the right and left wings of the party concerned all the fundamental questions of national and international politics until the collapse of the Second International in 1914. Moreover, they remain major questions today. The growing antagonisms, the incompatibility of the conflicting wings of the International that Luxemburg recognised earlier than any of the other prominent leaders of the left wing, that is, earlier than Lenin and Trotsky, became increasingly clear. The International and the SPD were held together by the "Centre" around Bebel and Kautsky with increasing difficulty, especially after the defeat of the Russian Revolution in 1905. Their solution to the conflicts between left and right increasingly consisted of elastic formulas, rotten compromises, based on a rejection of revisionism and reformism in theory but their operation in practice.

Luxemburg, on the other hand, became more and more the object of outright hatred not only of reaction, of the feudal Junkers and bourgeois, but also of the party right wingers and trade union leaders in Germany.

It was precisely in the top echelons of the trade unions that the organised core of the right in the party, of revisionism, was to be found at the turn of the century.

What Bernstein sought to justify "scientifically" had long since been implemented by the "practical men". They did not want "to play revolutionary games". In one famous expression repeated amongst them ?a general strike is general lunacy?. The union leaders and the expanding party bureaucracy, led after 1906 by Friedrich Ebert, did not want to be committed by the resolutions of the International and party congresses to militant forms of class struggle against the approaching imperialist war or even against the gunboat policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II. As Luxemburg well recognised, the "brusque class standpoint" of Marxism was proving irksome for them in their trade union "compensation policy".

## Relationship between party and trade union

From that also came the permanent striving of the trade union leaderships in Germany to make themselves "independent" of decisions of the Social Democracy or International congresses. Luxemburg railed sharply against these intentions, picking apart the whole policy of the apparatuses in her major pamphlet "The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trades Unions (1906)."

?This theory of the parallel action of social democracy and the trade-unions and of their ?equal authority? is nevertheless not altogether without foundation but has its historical roots. It rests upon the illusion of the peaceful, 'normal' period of bourgeois society, in which the political struggle of social democracy appears to be expressed in the parliamentary struggle. The parliamentary struggle, however, the counterpart of the trade-union struggle, is like it, a fight conducted exclusively on the basis of the bourgeois social order. It is,

by its very nature, political reform work, as that of the trade unions is economic reform work. It represents political work for the present, as trade unions represent economic work for the present. It is, like them, merely a phase, a stage of development in the complete process of the proletarian class struggle, whose ultimate goal is as far beyond the parliamentary struggle as it is beyond the trade-union struggle. The parliamentary struggle is, in relation to social democratic policy, also a part of the whole, exactly as trade-union work is. Social democracy today comprises the parliamentary and the trade-union struggle in one class struggle aiming at the abolition of the bourgeois social order.

"The theory of the 'equal authority' of trade-unions and social democracy is likewise not a mere theoretical misunderstanding, not a mere case of confusion but an expression of the well-known tendency of that opportunist wing of social democracy which reduced the political struggle of the working class to the parliamentary contest, and desires to change social democracy from a revolutionary proletarian party into a petty-bourgeois reform one.[1] If social democracy should accept the theory of the 'equal authority' of the trade unions, it would thereby accept, indirectly and tacitly, that transformation which has long been striven for by the representatives of the opportunist tendency." (LGW 2, p. 156 f.)

Incidentally, the above quotation also makes clear that Luxemburg by no means represented a "pure" "spontaneity theory" of the development of class consciousness or of the relationship between party and movement. This also comes out where she repeatedly stresses the necessity of gathering, forming and training the most advanced workers, the vanguard, in a revolutionary class party, a party that must be the leader of the struggle.

### Criticism of Kautsky

An enduring merit of Luxemburg's is not only to polemicise against the Right, but also to recognise, earlier than others, the increasingly compromising and hollow character of Kautsky's politics. Even before World War I, especially in the years 1910-1914, she intensified her attacks against the party's so-called "Marxist Centre" grouped around ?the Pope of Marxism? because it had increasingly moved away from revolutionary class politics against imperialism. Thus, Luxemburg denounced Kautsky's reformist and pacifist programme (arms limits, international arbitration, etc.).

It is no wonder that these works of Rosa Luxemburg are hardly known and rarely referred to today, since they constitute not only a scathing critique of reformism and centrism, but also the United Nations worship of today's "peace movement," the left wing of Social Democracy and former Stalinist parties, Die Linke and the DKP in Germany, or the Corbyn wing of the British Labour Party and the left wing of the trade union bureaucracy.

Luxemburg's increasing opposition to Kautsky was undoubtedly not a question of personal antagonism or one forced by her. She had worked closely with him, indeed influenced him, from the Revisionist controversy to the Russian Revolution of 1905. Rather, it resulted from Luxemburg's advocacy of an active Marxism that repeatedly came into conflict with the limits of social-democratic politics and programmatic method.

This method, developed essentially by Kautsky, schematically separated the minimum part, that is, the continuing "daily demands" (trade union rights, wages, legal reforms), from the maximum part (socialism, seizure of power by the proletariat). Since there was no mediation (no transitional element) between these two, pre-war Social Democracy was able for decades to simultaneously pursue a reformist practice while cultivating a formally Marxist theory. Since revolution seemed a distant prospect, the inner contradiction could be papered over.

However, the rising imperialist reaction, militarism, massive rearmament, as well as fundamental democratic questions (limited franchise, lack of control by the legislature over the executive) and the struggle against the social oppression of women, meant that the limits of the minimum-maximum programme were repeatedly revealed, even in immediate practical questions.

The party's right wing and the revisionist theoreticians did not want "radical" actions like the general strike, either in the struggle against militarism or for universal (women's) suffrage. They feared that such methods of struggle would thwart their gradualist policy of steadily achieving new reforms by peaceful means, scaring off the middle class and radicalising the reactionary forces in the army high command and the great landowners.

For Luxemburg, on the other hand, the sharpening of class antagonisms represented an inevitable consequence of the movement of capital itself. Therefore, she viewed Revisionism not only as an abandonment of the class standpoint, but also as a reactionary utopia.

For her, this had implications not only for the direct revolutionary escalation of the struggle, but even for that for reform. Luxemburg was clear that universal (women's) suffrage represented a bourgeois-democratic reform. But she resolutely refused to see it as a subordinate question or to put the struggle on the back burner. Still less did she see it as necessitating collaboration with bourgeois feminists on the latter's terms (for example, peaceful petitioning) Rather, in the face of extreme resistance from bourgeois and even monarchical reaction, she suggested resorting to revolutionary methods of struggle, such as the mass political strike, to push through such reforms.

This idea alone alarmed the party right wing and practically expressed the opposition of the emerging left wing to Revisionism. Luxemburg's attempt to radicalise party tactics thus challenged the "peace" within Social Democracy that Kautsky's Centre was determined to preserve. Hence the increasing sharpness of this opposition well before the World War broke out. The formation of a subjectively revolutionary left in German Social Democracy, and the increasing break with Kautsky's "centrists", undoubtedly represented a merit of Luxemburg and other party leftists. On this, her position was markedly superior to both Trotsky and Lenin,

But, unlike the formation of Bolshevism in Russian Social Democracy, Luxemburg and the Lefts did not develop their critique into a systematised programmatic and organisational form. When the war broke out in 1914, both these strengths and weaknesses, shaped their relationship to the split in the SPD. Forced by the right, Kautsky and his younger followers formed the Independent Social Democracy (the USPD), within which Rosa and the left formed a left wing (the International Group) then the Spartacus League and then, belatedly, the German Communist Party, (KPD) when the German revolution of 2018-19 was well underway.

### Concept of imperialism and crisis theory

Luxemburg, as is well known, was also a theorist who tried to grasp the development of capitalism, its internal crisis tendencies. In "The Accumulation of Capital. A Contribution to the Economic Explanation of Imperialism" as well as in "The Accumulation of Capital or What the Epigones Have Made of Marx's Theory. An Anticritique" (both in LGW, vol. 5) she herself makes the claim that "the explanation of the economic root of imperialism must be derived specifically from, and harmonised with, the laws of capital accumulation" (Anti-Criticism, LGW 5, p. 431).

As great as Luxemburg's merits are in defending Marxist theory and positions on many issues, not least in the field of economic theory, where she showed that Marx does indeed include a "theory of breakdown", it

must also be noted that her theory of imperialism has fundamental methodological weaknesses and precisely fails to meet its own objective of deriving the "economic root (...) from the laws of capital accumulation".

This has been pointed out, among others, by Roman Rosdolsky in "The making of Marx's Capital" and Henryk Grossmann in "The Law of Accumulation and Collapse of the Capitalist System". There, Grossmann summarised his critique of Luxemburg's analysis as follows:

"It does not derive the necessity of the downfall of capitalism from the immanent laws of capital accumulation, from a certain level of that, but from the transcendent fact of the absence of non-capitalist countries. Whereas Marx linked the problem of capitalism to the process of production, Rosa Luxemburg transfers the decisive problems for the existence of capitalism away from the sphere of production and into the sphere of circulation." (Grossmann, p. 21)

### Luxemburg's mistakes

Like all great revolutionaries, Luxemburg also made important mistakes. Certainly, among the best known is her lack of understanding of the national question and thus her underestimation of the liberation struggle of oppressed nations, as Lenin correctly noted in his critique of the Junius Brochure, her great anti-war pamphlet. Likewise, her theoretical weaknesses include her criticism, albeit based on fundamental solidarity, of some of the political and economic measures of the October Revolution under Lenin and Trotsky. But her support and enthusiasm for the revolution were undeniably great. After all, she saw in the October Revolution the, "salvation of international socialism".

Luxemburg, however, was as uncomfortable with the right of self-determination of the nations of former Tsarist Russia as with the agrarian programme of the October Revolution.

Perhaps her most profound disagreement was evident in her criticism of the Bolsheviks' dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in 1918, when Luxemburg still argued for a parallel establishment of soviet organs and the Assembly, arguing that the Bolsheviks should have held a new election to the Constituent Assembly.

Luxemburg was not clear here that under the dictatorship of the proletariat, as in general in the proletarian revolution, a permanent dualism of organs of revolutionary democracy, of councils, that is, organs of class rule by the proletariat on the one hand, and of bourgeois parliamentary organs, that is, forms of rule by the bourgeoisie, is not possible. Such dualism would mean a permanent dual power; it fails to see that, after the working class has conquered power, reaction automatically regroups around the bourgeois organs. Such dual power must be ended in one way or another, in favour of one side or the other, in revolution or counterrevolution.

As Paul Frölich writes in his very readable biography of Luxemburg, there is some evidence to suggest that Luxemburg began to recognise the weaknesses of her position on the basis of the experience of the German Revolution and the counterrevolutionary role played in it by the Constituent Assembly. The extent to which this assessment is correct is unclear. In any case, some of the most important leaders of the Spartacus League/KPD disagreed with Luxemburg's position: including Clara Zetkin, Ernst Meyer and Eugen Leviné (leader of the Munich Soviet, executed on the 5 July 1919).

### Her attitude toward Leninism

Even with her mistakes and weaknesses, however, Luxemburg was, and remains, a revolutionary role model, because even these were always fed by the will to advance the class struggle of the proletariat

theoretically and practically.

Even though she did not advocate a "spontaneity theory" of the development of class consciousness, and even if "Luxemburgism" is largely a posthumous construction; even if she absolutely held to the necessity of a revolutionary party, it would be wrong to deny or underestimate her differences with Lenin.

These first emerged abruptly in Russian social democracy after the 1903 party congress, after which Luxemburg polemicised fiercely against Lenin's struggle for a tightly centralised and disciplined party of professional revolutionaries. Undoubtedly, these articles, quite similar in content to Trotsky's anti-Bolshevik pamphlets and essays of that period, are among Luxemburg's weakest and most superficial works.

In "Rosa Luxemburg and the IV. International", Trotsky offers a very clear and balanced assessment of Luxemburg's understanding of the party as distinct from that of Lenin:

"Rosa herself never confined herself to the mere theory of spontaneity, like Parvus, for example, who later bartered his social revolutionary fatalism for the most revolting fatalism. In contrast to Parvus, Rosa Luxemburg exerted herself to educate the revolutionary wing of the proletariat in advance and to bring it together organisationally as far as possible. In Poland, she built up a very rigid independent organisation. The most that can be said is that in her historical-philosophical evaluation of the labour movement, the preparatory selection of the vanguard, in comparison with the mass actions that were to be expected, fell too short with Rosa; whereas Lenin, without consoling himself with the miracles of future actions, took the advanced workers and constantly and tirelessly welded them together into firm nuclei, illegally or legally, in the mass organisations or underground, by means of a sharply defined programme.

"Rosa's theory of spontaneity was a wholesome weapon against the ossified apparatus of reformism. By the fact that it was often directed against Lenin's work of building up a revolutionary apparatus, it revealed, to be sure, only in embryo, its reactionary features. With Rosa herself this occurred only episodically. She was much too realistic in the revolutionary sense to develop the elements of the theory of spontaneity into a consummate metaphysics. In practice, she herself, as has already been said, undermined this theory at every step. After the revolution of November 1918, she began the ardent labour of assembling the proletarian vanguard."

(Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and the Fourth International, Writings of Leon Trotsky 1935-36 P30.)

The great revolutionary could only begin this work. In January 1919, she was murdered by the counterrevolution. Both her legacy and the tasks for which she worked tirelessly live on; the proletarian world revolution, the building of a new, revolutionary communist party and a new International.

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