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# **The Challenge of Revolutionary Democracy in the Life and Thought of Rosa Luxemburg**

Tuesday 14 March 2006, by [LE BLANC Paul](#) (Date first published: 21 March 2006).

**Talk presented March 21 at an International Conference - organized under the name "Rosa Luxemburg's Thought and Its Contemporary Value" - at Wuhan University by the School of Philosophy and The Institute of Marxist Philosophy in the People's Republic of China March 20-22, 2006.**

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Rosa Luxemburg's life and intelligence have illuminated the human experience and inspired many people who have reached for a better world. Many of her insights and inclinations seem to place her in advance, on certain essential matters, of certain co-thinkers or partial co-thinkers who, like her, are also central to the Marxist tradition — whether Kautsky, or Lenin, or Trotsky. This comes through, I think, in the way she talks about the natural world, in her sense of kinship with other creatures of this planet, in her open and penetrating engagement with human dignity and human suffering, in her often luminously sensual formulations and turns of phrase, and also in her wonderful humor. Her writings are incredibly alive. [1]

Bertolt Brecht once wrote a poem about Luxemburg after she had been dealt with by right-wing death squads in 1919:

*Red Rosa now has vanished too.  
Where she lies is hid from view.  
She told the poor what life is about.  
And so now the rich have rubbed her out.* [2]

And yet, again and again since her death, the spirit and ideas of Red Rosa have returned. In our own time, however, especially with the 20<sup>th</sup> century's final decade, there have been renewed and incredibly powerful efforts to rub out Rosa Luxemburg altogether, as part of a well-orchestrated effort to see that Marxism itself be made to vanish as a force that can be used for understanding and changing the world.

The only way to bring this wonderful comrade to life is to refuse to be content with simply "honoring her memory" or with detailing her ideas as if we were placing the corpses of butterflies in a glass case. Rather, we must embrace - as critically and honestly as we can - the challenge of her ideas for our own time. This challenge (and especially the challenge of revolutionary democracy) is poignantly relevant to all countries, from Russia to Poland, from Germany to the United States, from Japan to China to India, from South Africa to Cuba to Brazil. Rosa Luxemburg and revolutionary Marxism live to the extent that they are absorbed into our own thoughts and actions as we struggle against oppressive realities of our own time.

Luxemburg stands as a powerful challenge to a number of false conceptions very prevalent today regarding both Marxism and democracy. Among the most powerful and influential ideologists in the world today are those who tell us that the market economy and democracy (that is, capitalism and rule by the people) historically and naturally develop hand-in-hand, and that it is not possible, for any length of time, to have one without the other. If Rosa Luxemburg were here today, she would argue incisively and persuasively - as she did in her own time - that this is a lie. There is also the myth, propagated by pro-capitalist propagandists as well as all too many would-be Communists, that socialism is something to be brought about through authoritarian measures.

We should deal with these two myths one at a time.

The natural development of the market economy, of capitalism (regardless of whether one views it as in some ways positive or "progressive") is certainly authoritarian. It is based upon, and it further enhances, inequality of economic power, which naturally generates an inequality of political power. There is nothing so authoritarian as a capitalist workplace, whose function is to manage the exploitation of large numbers of workers, and this is so regardless of whether that authoritarianism assumes either brutal or benign postures. And the capitalist marketplace functions, primarily, not to meet the needs of the great majority of the people (the consumers) but rather to maximize the profits of the small minority that owns and controls the economy. [3]

If she were here, Luxemburg would also focus our attention on the actual dynamics of capitalist development in Central and Eastern Europe - the Germany, Poland, and Russia with which she was so familiar. There, for the most part, the capitalist class, sensing a greater kinship with the elites above them than with the masses below them, deferred to and intertwined with the traditional elites that were inclined to maintain authoritarianism as the political framework within which the market economy and industrial modernization would be allowed to flourish. [4]

Red Rosa would point out to us - as she did in her own day - that democracy can be advanced only through the struggles of the growing working-class majority, only through the self-organization of working people through mass movements for social and political reform, through strong, independent, democratic trade unions, through democratic mass working-class parties. Historically, it was not the normal functioning of the capitalist market, but rather the mass pressure and mass struggle of the working class movement and its allies that paved the way, step-by-step, for the expansion of democratic rights, democratic reforms, and democratic political structures. [5]

At the same time, Luxemburg was insistent that capitalism and democracy are incompatible, that in multiple ways the natural functioning of the capitalist market-place and of the capitalist class result in proliferating restrictions, manipulations, corruptions, erosions that undermine the gains of the working-class and prevent (and must always prevent) the blossoming of a fully democratic society. And she was critical (and would be critical now) of currents in the labor and socialist movements which deny or forget that capitalism and democracy are incompatible.

Luxemburg also observed - and brilliantly analyzed - the powerful expansionist tendencies of capitalism. These resulted in the invasion of more and more portions of the globe, violating the cultures, the quality of life, and the self-determination of innumerable peoples for the benefit of capitalist enterprises that were compelled to reach for ever-expanding markets, raw materials, and investment opportunities. This authoritarian process of global capital accumulation, defined as imperialism, was also dependent on the expansion of exceptionally authoritarian military machines. The aggressive expansionism and growing militarism would, as Luxemburg so correctly predicted, result in violent catastrophes (colonial wars, world wars, and more) in which the masses of people would pay the price, for the benefit of wealthy and powerful elites. She warned that such developments might also whirl out of control and threaten the future of civilization itself. [6]

Against this triumph of authoritarianism, violence, and death, Luxemburg passionately struggled for the socialist alternative. In her view, the socialist movement had proved to be the most consistent force for democracy in the world - a view which has received considerable support from knowledgeable and serious historians in recent years. More than this, she viewed socialism quite simply as an expanded, deepened, authentic democracy - genuine rule by the people in both the political and economic life of society. Her notion of a workers' state (what has sometimes been called "dictatorship of the proletariat") had nothing to do with a one-party dictatorship ruling in the name of the people. Rather it meant what Marx and Engels said in the Communist Manifesto when they spoke of the working class winning the battle of democracy, what Lenin meant in *The State and Revolution*, when he spoke of a thorough-going political rule by the working class. This was in contrast to the authoritarian political forms that began to develop all-too-soon in the wake of the 1917 Russian Revolution. [7]

Luxemburg was an early critic of this development, challenging Lenin and the Bolsheviks — whom she held in high esteem — to pull back from their dangerously expansive justifications for the undemocratic emergency measures that were adopted in the face of both internal counter-revolutionary assaults and a global capitalist counter-offensive. "Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party - however numerous they may be - is no freedom at all," she insisted. "Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently." In her prophetic warning she elaborated:

*Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. Public life gradually falls asleep, a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule. Among them, in reality only a dozen outstanding heads do the leading and an elite of the working class is invited from time to time to meetings where they are to applaud the speeches of the leaders, and to approve proposed resolutions unanimously - at bottom, then, a clique affair - a dictatorship, to be sure, not the dictatorship of the proletariat, however, but only the dictatorship of a handful of politicians ...* [8]

Luxemburg was also profoundly critical of authoritarian developments of a different sort inside her own Social-Democratic Party of Germany. An increasingly powerful tendency inside the party and trade union leadership was arguing that the gradual accumulation of reforms - to painlessly erase capitalism's worst features - would be a better path for achieving socialist goals. Luxemburg responded that it was not possible to choose different paths to socialism in the same way that one might choose either spicy sausages or mild sausages in the market. The reformist path, she prophetically insisted, would not lead gradually to socialism at all, but to the gradual accommodation and subjugation of the socialist movement to the authoritarian proclivities, the brutal realities, and the violent dynamics of the capitalist system. Even though vital gains could be won for the working class through struggles for reforms, this would be like the labor of Sisyphus - the strong man in the ancient Greek myth who time after time would roll a heavy boulder up a steep hill, only to have the gods roll it back down again. So would the natural dynamics of capitalism time after time outflank and erode the reforms won by the labor movement. [9]

Luxemburg taught that in order to remain true to its democratic and socialist principles, and in order to defend the material interests of the workers and the oppressed, the socialist workers' movement - even while fighting for necessary and life-giving partial reforms - would sometimes find itself in uncompromising confrontation with the capitalist power structure. What she and her revolutionary-minded comrades found, however, is that the increasingly bureaucratized structure of their own socialist workers' movement was becoming an obstacle to the internal democracy of the movement. The increasingly bureaucratic-conservative leadership of the trade unions and party more and more sought to contain radicalizing impulses of the working-class membership, to limit the

ability of people such as Luxemburg to present a revolutionary socialist perspective, to deflect upsurges in the class struggle into safely moderate channels. They sought to maintain the reformist strategy that they sincerely believed was more “practical,” but which was, in fact, entwining the labor movement into the authoritarian structures and disastrous directions of the capitalist status quo. [10]

Rosa Luxemburg was quite clear that the majority of the people - and the working class as such - were by no means uniformly or consistently inclined to go in a revolutionary or socialist direction. She saw political and social consciousness among the masses of people as incredibly deep and diverse, contradictory, shifting and changing, tending to go in one direction at one point and then in a very different direction soon after. The oppressive and sometimes horrific nature of capitalist development, however, when combined with the clear and capable articulation of perspectives of class-struggle and socialism, could sometimes cause dramatic upsurges - what she called mass strikes, or mass actions, that would often take place outside of existing structures of the labor movement. She saw this, in part, as essential in the creation of militant new trade unions and other organizations of the workers and oppressed, although its implications went further. Luxemburg had no desire to deny the importance of the day-to-day work of the existing trade unions and of the votes cast by the socialist representatives elected to Germany’s parliament. But a movement capable of actually attaining socialism must go beyond this. It was essential, she believed, that a proliferation of possibilities be found to engage more and more people in action, in experience that would deepen their own understanding and commitment and skills, that would enhance their own confidence and creativity, as well as their ability to inspire and win ever more workers to the revolutionary cause. [11]

And this understanding was central for her as a revolutionary strategist, distinguishing her from the dominant leadership of the German Social-Democratic Party. Luxemburg gave great weight to so-called “extra-parliamentary” social struggles, and to a dynamic interplay between existing organizations and spontaneous mass action. This frightened her less revolutionary comrades. She put it this way:

*As bred-in-the-bone disciples of parliamentary cretinism, these German social democrats have sought to apply to revolutions the homemade wisdom of the parliamentary nursery: in order to carry anything, you must first have a majority. The same, they say, applies to the revolution: first let’s become a “majority.” The true dialectic of revolutions, however, stands this wisdom on its head: not through a majority to revolutionary tactics, but through revolutionary tactics to a majority - that is the way the road runs. Only a party which knows how to lead, that is, to advance things, wins support in stormy times. [12]*

For Luxemburg there was a remarkable consistency between this revolutionary-democratic strategic perspective and her revolutionary-democratic vision of socialism. Here is how she put it:

*Bourgeois class rule has no need of the political training and education of the entire mass of the people, at least not beyond certain narrow limits. But for the proletarian dictatorship that is the life element, the very air without which it is not able to exist. ... Only experience is capable of correcting and opening new ways. Only unobstructed, effervescing life falls into a thousand new forms and improvisations, brings to light creative force, itself corrects all mistaken attempts. ... The whole mass of the people must take part. ... Socialism in life demands a complete spiritual transformation in the masses degraded by centuries of class rule. Social instincts in place of egotistical ones, mass initiative in place of inertia, idealism which conquers all suffering. ... The only way to a rebirth is the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion. [13]*

It is obvious that such genuine democracy as Rosa Luxemburg believed in cannot be bestowed on a

people through charismatic leaders, through well-meaning revolutionary elites, through single-party dictatorships, through labor bureaucracies, through glitzy election campaigns financed by big-business interests, and certainly not through military invasions from powerful outsiders. It must be won through the accumulation of experience and struggles, also the proliferation of seasoned activists and democratic organizations, and the consequent rise of consciousness and revolutionary-democratic commitment among the masses of the people themselves, especially the immense majority of those who labor. [14]

And people such as ourselves, of course, must face the difficult question of whether we want to help advance such a process, and if so, how.

## notes

1. An exploration of the Marxist tradition, and in part of Luxemburg's place within it, is offered in Paul Le Blanc, *From Marx to Gramsci, A Reader in the Revolutionary Marxist Politics* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), with further elaboration in Paul Le Blanc, *Rosa Luxemburg, Reflections and Writings* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999). Key texts on this and related matters are Paul Frolich, *Rosa Luxemburg, Her Life and Work* (New York: Monthly Review, 1972) and Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Verso, 1983). The most recent English-language anthology of Luxemburg's writings is also well worth consulting - *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. by Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004).
2. Quoted in Wendy Forrest, *Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), 61.
3. See, for example, Rosa Luxemburg, "What Is Economics?" in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. by Mary-Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 220-249.
4. Relevant here are Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), and Peter Nettle, *Rosa Luxemburg, Abridged Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 72-74, 304-305.
5. The centrality of democracy in Marxism has been well-established for some time - see, for example, Michael Lowy, *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*, 2 vols. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974, 1984), and August H. Nimtz, Jr., *Marx and Engels, Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough* (Albany: New York State University Press, 2000). On the centrality of Marxist-influenced political movements for the advance of democracy, see Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
6. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), and "The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis and the German Social Democracy," in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 261-331.
7. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Le Blanc, *From Marx to Gramsci*, 143; Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, "The State and Revolution," in *Selected Works*, Vol. 2 (New York: international Publishers, 1967, 343-345).
8. "The Russian Revolution," in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 389, 391.
9. The points on sausages and Sisyphus can be found in Luxemburg's "Reform or Revolution" in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 71, 77. Her growing critique of the orientation of the Social-Democratic leadership can be seen in "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions" in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 155-218, in the excerpt of "Theory and Practice" in Le Blanc, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 139-174 (a slightly different excerpt is in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, 208-231), and correspondence to be found in Stephen Eric Bronner, ed., *The Letters*

of *Rosa Luxemburg*, Second Edition (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), 129, 149, 179, 294-295.

10. See Carl Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905-1917: The Development of the Great Schism* (New York: Wiley, 1955).
11. These perspectives are elaborated in sources cited in footnote 9 above, as well as in Luxemburg's "Speech to the Founding Convention of the German Communist Party" in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 405-427.
12. "The Russian Revolution" in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 374.
13. *Ibid.*, 389-391. Also see "The Socialization of Society," in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, 346-348.
14. One recent effort pushing in this direction is the late Daniel Singer's final work, *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999). Another can be found in materials by Eveline Wittich, Paul Le Blanc, Ottakar Luban, Thomas Deve, and Lindsey Collen in a conference of scholars and activists organized by South Africa's Anti-War Movement and the Johannesburg office of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation - *Militarism and War: Rosa Luxemburg Political Education Seminar 2004* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Khanya College Publishing, 2005).