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The Revolutionary Orientation of Rosa Luxemburg

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Rosa Luxemburg was a brilliant theorist, whose classic *The Accumulation of Capital* – an essential Marxist work on imperialism – continues to be a resource for those who want to understand the world in which we live. (This is something on which I will share my thoughts in another session). But she was committed not only to understanding the world but also to changing it. I want to concentrate here on her thinking about how to do this.

Born into a well-to-do and highly cultured family that would nurture the critical intelligence of this exceptionally bright daughter, Rosa came into the world on March 5, 1871 — just before insurgent workers of Paris rose up to establish their heroic and short-lived Commune. Of course, Rosa was Polish, not French, but the dual revolution of democratic aspiration and industrial capitalist transformation was generating the rise of the socialist movement on a global scale. She was drawn into the revolutionary movement in Poland before she was fifteen years old. Even as she was completing her formal academic education which culminated in a doctorate in economics at the University of Zurich, she was being trained and tempered in the Marxist underground. Her closest comrades were professional revolutionaries and working-class intellectuals whose lives were an idealistic and passionate blend of revolutionary agitation and organizing, intensive education and analysis, seasoned with debates and polemics, sometimes punctuated by strikes or insurrections, and often laced with prison and martyrdom. [i]

Central to Rosa Luxemburg's strategic orientation for achieving global justice was the commitment to the liberation struggles of the working-class majority. Those whose lives and labor keep society running are the ones who should run society. It is the great majority of the people who must shape the future. "Socialism cannot be made and will not be made by command, not even by the best and most capable Socialist government," she insisted. "It must be made by the masses, through every proletarian individual." [ii]

When we try to look at the labor movement to which Rosa Luxemburg belonged, we are at a serious disadvantage. We tend to superimpose our own experience, or our lack of experience blended with various abstract notions, over the living reality of the German workers' movement, in which she became involved more than a century ago. There are relatively few studies that try to give a real sense of that movement, and there are very few attempts to connect such things with the biography and ideas of Rosa Luxemburg. In my comments here I want to utilize one of those rare studies – Mary Nolan's *Social Democracy and Society: Working-Class Radicalism in Dusseldorf*. And I will make special reference to one of the local working-class activists described in that study – Peter Berten, who was in his mid-20s when Luxemburg burst on the scene of left-wing German politics in

the late 1890s, and in his mid-40s when she was killed by right-wing death squads in 1919. [iii]

Luxemburg's views on the labor movement corresponded to those of Karl Marx. She embraced (as did most German Social Democrats) the orientation presented in the Communist Manifesto – that the workers should struggle for various reforms to expand democratic rights and improve immediate economic and social conditions, that they should build increasingly effective and inclusive trade unions to secure better working conditions and higher living standards, that they should build their own working-class political party. She accepted Marx's view that the workers' party should struggle to "win the battle for democracy" – winning political power in order to make "despotic inroads" into the capitalist economy for the purpose of bringing about the socialist reconstruction of society. And like Marx, Luxemburg believed that the defenders of the old social order would not permit a peaceful and gradual transition to socialism – that they would unleash violence (perhaps sooner rather than later) to preserve their privileges, and they would have to be overcome through the revolutionary struggle of the workers and their allies. [iv]

The specifics of Luxemburg's political orientation assumed the existence of a mass working-class movement that included but went beyond trade unions. There was a vibrant labor press, a network of cooperatives, a political party, and a growing array of cultural institutions.

Young Peter Berten, who completed elementary school and then learned cabinetmaking from his father, for much of his young adulthood was an itinerant journeyman moving from job to job in various cities in the Lower Rhine, and soon he became a militant of the woodworkers union. After participating in "lively political discussions at union meetings" over a period of a few years, he joined the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), and the young worker proved to be a capable and dedicated organizer and agitator for the socialist cause. By 1904, Berten was a central leader of the SPD in Dusseldorf, sometimes serving as the organization's paid secretary, and in 1908 he became the editor of the local newspaper of the Dusseldorf socialists, the *Volkszeitung*, which had a subscription base of 6000. [v]

In this period trade union membership in Dusseldorf rose from 5400 in 1903 to almost 25,000 in 1912, with SPD membership rising from 950 to more than 7000 in the same years, about 98% of whom were working class. The SPD vote in Dusseldorf rose from 20,000 in 1903 to more than 42,000 – just under 50% of all Dusseldorf's votes – in 1912. In 1909 a Volkshaus (or People's House) – a political and cultural center – was opened by the local SPD, "a home where workers are master," Peter Berten wrote proudly, "and not dependent on the goodwill of speculating parasites ... a home where they can raise themselves above the misery of daily life, if only for a few hours." In addition to trade unions and the political party, more than 2000 workers participated in a consumer cooperative, and more than 8000 each year took advantage of legal and social service advisors offered by the Dusseldorf workers movement. Hundreds participated in workers education courses ("to expand people's knowledge in the class struggle," as one SPD militant emphasized, dealing with such topics as history, economics, and Marxism). Sometimes thousands each year attended SPD forums on important issues facing the working class, and public protests rallying workers – according to SPD flyers – "to do everything possible to improve the condition of the working class and eliminate capitalism." [vi]

Not all of Germany was Dusseldorf, but Dusseldorf was not unique. And this reflected the context in which Luxemburg functioned. And we will see that her ideas reflected this context, and resonated among many who were part of this labor movement. It is worth emphasizing what is hard for many of us in the United States to remember. The labor movement is much more than the unions. Twenty percent of Dusseldorf workers were in unions, but the ratio of union members to party members shifted from 13 trade unionists for every 1 party member in 1901, to just 5 to 1 by 1907, and 3 to 1 in 1912. Even so, SPD leaders like Berten complained that too many workers remained "just trade

unionists.” [vii]

An aspect of this dilemma was discussed by Luxemburg in 1904 in the following manner:

The international movement of the proletariat toward its complete emancipation is a process peculiar in the following respect. For the first time in the history of civilization, the people are expressing their will consciously and in opposition to all ruling classes. But this can only be satisfied beyond the limits of the existing system.

“Now the mass can only acquire and strengthen this will in the course of the day-to-day struggle against the existing social order – that is, within the limits of capitalist society.” On the one hand, we have the mass; on the other, its historic goal, located outside of existing society. On one hand, we have the day-to-day struggle; on the other, the social revolution. Such are the terms of the dialectical contradiction through which the socialist movement makes its way.

“It follows that this movement can best advance by tacking betwixt and between the two dangers by which it is constantly being threatened. One is the loss of its mass character; the other, the abandonment of its goal. One is the danger of sinking back into the condition of a sect; the other, the danger of becoming a movement of bourgeois social reform.” [viii]

That dilemma relates to a crisis that developed in the German Social Democracy. A strong tendency developed among the national trade union leadership – members of the SPD, but leading relatively strong union organizations the majority of whose members were not SPD members, organizations whose primary goal was to secure higher wages and better working conditions within the context of the capitalist economy. These trade union leaders wanted to bring the SPD under the control of the unions, to prevent revolutionary-minded socialists from pushing the unions in a more radical direction, and instead getting the SPD to advance the moderate trade union agenda. A layer of the SPD functionaries wanted to go in this moderate direction, which they hoped would help the party accumulate votes of non-radical (and to some extent non-working-class) layers of the population. [ix]

The tension between revolutionaries and reformists cropped up over and over, with greater intensity – for example, in 1908 around courses that Luxemburg and others were teaching at the recently-established Central Party School in Berlin. Paul Frolich tells us that the more than 200 students who had attended the school came from “a colorful variety of backgrounds: next to raw youngsters who had only a smattering of socialism, but had distinguished themselves in one way or another in their work for the party, there were old and experienced party workers. They represented a very wide variety of occupations: mechanics, carpenters, decorators, miners, party secretaries, trade unionists, housewives, intellectuals. Most of them had derived their knowledge of socialism only from agitational pamphlets, and were not used to systematic thought.” Peter Nettl records that her students responded to Luxemburg’s classes with enthusiasm: “She was a natural and enthusiastic teacher, clarifying the most complicated philosophical issues of Marxism with lively similes and illustrations, making the subject not only real but important.” [x]

Those who feared that the wrong kind of workers’ education was being conducted at the school demanded that more practical matters take the place of revolutionary abstractions. “Do the masses have to know the theory of value? Do the masses need to know what the materialist theory of history is?” asked Kurt Eisner, who answered his own question with the comment that such stuff has no direct value and can even be harmful for working-class activists, concluding: “Theory frequently has the actual effect of killing the power to come to conclusions and to take action.” Luxemburg’s retort drew enthusiastic applause at the 1908 Party Congress: “They think the materialist conception of history, as they understand it, has on them the effect of crippling their ability to act and they therefore think that theory should not be taught at the Party School, but hard facts, the hard facts of

life. They haven't the faintest idea that the proletariat knows the hard facts from its everyday life, the proletariat knows the 'hard facts' better than Eisner. What the masses lack is general enlightenment, the theory which gives us the possibility of systematizing the hard facts and forging them into a deadly weapon to use against our opponents." [xi]

Peter Berten was a student at the Berlin Party School in 1906, and the classes he took with Luxemburg – he later acknowledged – taught him that "one cannot talk of an automatic development from a capitalist economy to a socialist one. Capitalism lays the basis for a socialist society but the working class must bring it about." Berten's views – as a leader of the SPD in Dusseldorf, and as the editor of the *Volkszeitung* – closely corresponded to the outlook of Luxemburg. He denounced those who were trying, as he put it, to turn the SPD into "a bourgeois radical reform party," insisting that "we have no cause to give up our principles and our tactics. The capitalist system with its injuries cannot be eliminated by concessions to the ruling class and its government." He explained that the SPD was radical in the Lower Rhine, and reformist revisionism could not secure a foothold there, "because the economic and political pressures that bear down on the workers in our region are so strong. Through them the masses are forged together and learn class consciousness and revolutionary thinking." Yet there were fluctuations in working-class consciousness. In 1913, after SPD electoral victories in Dusseldorf, he was warning that "some of our comrades seem to be of the opinion that since we won the Reichstag election everything has been achieved... Most believe that they have fulfilled their responsibilities if they pay their dues and attend an occasional meeting." But the combination of seeking petty reforms while passively waiting for the revolution, Berten insisted, "cannot possibly inspire and sweep along the masses. Only great goals can waken enthusiasm and a willingness to sacrifice." [xii]

In Berten's opinion, "Only a revolutionary tactic, which always builds on the reality of class conflict and appeals to the elemental power of the masses, can waken the energy, activism, and enthusiasm of the exploited proletariat." He emphasized in the *Volkszeitung* that "the mass strike is the method of struggle which is most suited to the social position of the proletariat." In his opinion: "What the proletariat possesses, in addition to its chains, is the power that does not disappear through struggle. Rather it grows until it suffices to break the chains." Mary Nolan reports that "Berten and several other functionaries were the most vociferous proponents of the mass strike, but their ideas found a sympathetic echo among comrades locally and regionally." [xiii]

As Luxemburg explained it, the workings and contradictions of capitalism can sometimes result in what she called a "violent and sudden jerk which disturbs the momentary equilibrium of everyday social life," aggravating "deep-seated, long-suppressed resentment" among workers and other social layers, resulting in an explosive and spontaneous reaction on a mass scale – in the form of strikes spreading through an industry and sometimes involving many, most, or all occupations and workplaces in one or more regions. Such mass strikes can go far beyond economic issues, sometimes involving whole communities in mass demonstrations and street battles, and are the means by which workers seek to "grasp at new political rights and attempt to defend existing ones." Once such strikes begin, there can occur tremendous solidarity, discipline, and effective organization. But they have an elemental quality which defies any notion of revolutionary blueprints being drawn up in advance. Luxemburg believed that Social Democrats (whom she defined as "the most enlightened, most class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat") should play an active role not only when such explosions occur, but also beforehand in helping to educate and organize more and more workers in preparation for such developments, which would enable Social Democrats to assume leadership of the whole movement. She by no means believed that such upsurges would necessarily result in socialist revolution. But neither did she believe that they would wreck labor organizations. Rather, in her words, they became "the starting point of a feverish work of organization." While labor and socialist bureaucrats might "fear that the organizations will be shattered in a revolutionary

whirlwind like rare porcelain," Luxemburg's observations of actual mass strikes during 1905-1906 in Eastern Europe showed that the opposite is the case: "From the whirlwind and the storm, out of the fire and glow of the mass strike and the street fighting rise again, like Venus from the foam, fresh, young, powerful, buoyant trade unions." Some segments of the working class cannot be unionized through "the form of quiet, systematic, partial trade union struggles," she noted, and her words drive home the point that "a powerful and reckless fighting action of the proletariat, born of a revolutionary situation, must surely react upon the deeper-lying layers and ultimately draw all those into a general economic struggle who, in normal times, stand aside from the daily trade union fight." [xiv]

Luxemburg's revolutionary orientation resonated throughout much of the German labor movement. There were, however, powerful trade union leaders who despised her. They were insulted by her comment that trade union struggles can only be like the labor of Sisyphus (rolling the boulder up a hill, only to have capitalist dynamics push the gains back down again), and that only socialism will secure permanent gains for the working class. Of course, she added that it is necessary for trade unions to wage that struggle in order to defend and improve the workers' conditions in the here-and-now. But this did not make up for her barbed observation that "the specialization of professional activity as trade-union leaders, as well as the naturally restricted horizon which is bound up with disconnected economic struggles in a peaceful period, leads only too easily, among trade union officials, to bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook." She was specific: first, there was "an overvaluation of the [trade union] organization, which from a means has been gradually been changed into an end in itself, a precious thing, to which the interests of the struggles should be subordinated," and second "the trade union leaders, constantly absorbed in the economic guerrilla war whose plausible task it is to make the workers place the highest value on the smallest economic achievement, every increase in wages and shortening of the working day, gradually lose the power of seeing the larger connections and taking a survey of the whole position" facing the working class. [xv]

But other trade unionists, a left-wing dissident current which Peter Berten and others represented, appreciated her approach to struggling for reforms (relevant to workplace struggles no less than to parliamentary struggles) — the notion that an uncompromising militancy will gain more than an allegedly "practical-minded" moderation. If one wants a shorter work day, for example, and one hears that the bourgeois politicians (or managerial negotiators) are prepared to favor a ten-hour workday but not an eight-hour workday, one should not offer to form an alliance with them in favor of a ten-hour day. One should instead engage in a militant struggle for the eight-hour day as the best means for pressuring them into actually coming up with their ten-hour compromise. This also builds a class-conscious militancy necessary for future struggles.

This orientation comes through even in the way that Luxemburg talks about May Day in 1913. She said: "The brilliant basic idea of May Day is the autonomous, immediate stepping forward of the proletarian masses, the political mass action of the millions of workers who otherwise are atomized by the barriers of the state in the day-to-day parliamentary affairs, who mostly can give expression of their own will only through the ballot, through the election of their representatives." Noting the rising tide of imperialist exploitation and violence, she concluded that "the more the idea of May Day, the idea of resolute mass actions as a manifestation of international unity, and as a means of struggle for peace and for socialism, takes root in the strongest troops of the International, the German working class, the greater is our guarantee that out of the world war which, sooner or later, is unavoidable, will come forth a definite and victorious struggle between the world of labor and of capital." [xvi]

Despite considerable lip-service given to Marxist theory and socialist goals, the German Social Democratic Party "looks damn bad—completely headless... No one leads it, no one shoulders

responsibility,” as she put it. Instead there was organizational routinism, there was a focus on winning more elections to put more socialist politicians into parliament where they maneuvered and bargained for limited reforms, and there was the growing influence of a powerful trade union leadership focused on winning piecemeal concessions within the existing social order. Such things tended to remove the masses of workers as an active factor in the struggle for a better future, keeping them under “the heel [as she put it] of the old authorities and, what’s more, to the upper strata of opportunist [socialist] editors, [parliamentary] deputies, and trade union leaders.”

In the following year, Luxemburg and her revolutionary comrades found themselves trapped in the left-wing of a bureaucratized mass party which, when World War I erupted in 1914, supported the brutalizing imperialist war effort instead of organizing working-class resistance. More than this, its leaders looked with relief upon the imprisonment of Rosa Luxemburg for anti-war activity. In the aftermath of the war, as the working-class radicalization foreseen by Luxemburg gathered momentum, the Social-Democratic bureaucracy was able to divert much of the proletarian militancy into “safe” channels. Luxemburg and the most committed revolutionaries were first blocked and then expelled, left without an adequate revolutionary instrument of their own. Amid the rising proletarian ferment and counter-revolutionary violence of late 1918 and early 1919, they were forced to begin rebuilding an organization.

In 1917 Lenin and the Bolsheviks, thanks to the working-class and peasant upsurge in their own country, and thanks also to years of serious organizational development had succeeded in establishing a revolutionary workers’ government in Russia and appealed for the spread of revolutions throughout Europe, and beyond Europe, but in highly industrialized Germany most of all. Increasing numbers of German workers and war-weary soldiers responded with enthusiasm (so, for that matter, did Rosa Luxemburg, who soon was released from prison). This coincided with the collapse of the German war effort, and the collapse of the monarchy. It seemed that Germany was on the verge of socialist revolution—but the only substantial organizational expression of socialism in the country was the German Social Democratic Party which by now was in the hands of the worst of opportunistic bureaucrats who were far more hostile to working-class revolution than to their own landed aristocrats and big business interests. The result was a compact between the Social Democratic leadership and the German economic elite, also involving the top levels of the old governmental and military apparatus, to preserve as much of the old social order as possible, masked for a short while with socialist and democratic rhetoric.

In order to win the radicalized masses to a genuinely revolutionary socialist alternative, Luxemburg and others formed the Spartakusbund—the Spartacus League (named after the leader of the great slave revolt that shook the Roman empire) — which was not strong enough to lead the workers to a revolutionary victory. At the same time, it is important not to under-rate the Spartakusbund. Historian William Pelz, argues that “by war’s end, Spartakus had grown into an organization of thousands with influence in numerous working class areas.” Since Pelz has inquired more carefully than most into the nature and dimensions of this movement that Luxemburg led, it is worth considering more of what he has to say in his fine study *The Spartakusbund and the German Working Class Movement 1914-1919*:

“Struggling underground, the Spartakusbund was able to grow, propagate its ideas and develop linkages with like-minded revolutionary groups and individuals, based heavily in urban industrial areas. Thus, Luxemburg, [Karl] Liebknecht and the other Spartakusbund leaders directed what was the heart of a growing revolutionary workers movement. Young, active and concentrated in the most modern vital sections of the economy, Spartakusbund members were to prove the revolutionary voice within the ideological vacuum [which the bureaucratized leadership of the German] Social Democracy labored to maintain]”. [xvii]

This suggests that if Luxemburg, Liebknecht and other key Spartakus leaders had not met their deaths in 1919, then around them a powerful, self-confident, increasingly experienced leadership core would have crystallized to lead a growing German Communist Party to victory in, say, 1920 or 1923, when genuine revolutionary possibilities emerged. This would have rescued the Russian Revolution from the isolation that would soon generate Stalinism, at the same time preventing the possibility of the rise of Hitlerism in Germany.

From the standpoint of those determined to preserve the old social order, Rosa Luxemburg could not be allowed to live. The fact that she was a woman, and that her life had included — on her own terms — sensual love and revolutionary activity, made her a special target. The cultural and political reactionaries of her time were fixated on the sexuality and political subversion represented by this “Jewish slut” who was the repulsive “bloody Rosa,” someone fit to be murdered in the so-called “Spartakus days” of January 1919, when—against Luxemburg’s warnings—revolutionary euphoria led her comrades into an ultra-left collision with a better organized, better armed, powerful enemy that had been waiting for an opportunity to unleash the death squads of the so-called Freikorps.

But Luxemburg’s vibrant, passionate life and intelligence are with us still in her writings, which continue to have an amazing relevance to the realities that we face today. I think this comrade would want us to give serious thought to the question of what we can do to help change the world to a place in which the free development of each person would be the condition for the development of all. This conference – in which we are collectively seeking to learn the lessons of Luxemburg’s ideas and activities, and to apply them to our own time – not only does honor to this wonderful revolutionary, but (with luck and hard work) can help direct our attention and energies into a hopeful future.

Notes

[i] The “dual revolution” concept is highlighted in Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), and a succinct survey of the rise, within this context, of the workers’ movement of which Luxemburg was part can be found in Wolfgang Abendroth, *A Short History of the European Working Class* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972). For a useful new collection of Luxemburg’s writings, see Peter Hudis and Keven B. Anderson, eds., *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), which, in combination with volumes edited by Le Blanc and Waters cited below, provides the bulk of what is available to English-language readers.

[ii] Quoted by Richard Hyman, “Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism,” *Trade Unions Under Capitalism*, ed. by Tom Clarke and Laurie Clements (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), 389. The range of Luxemburg’s thought, and key aspects of her biography and personality, are elaborated in Paul Le Blanc, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg, Reflections and Writings* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), which on pages 256-257 includes a somewhat different translation of this passage from Luxemburg’s “Speech to the Founding Convention of the Communist Party.”

[iii] Mary Nolan, *Social Democracy and Society: Working-Class Radicalism in Dusseldorf, 1890-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Other works that do this include Vernon Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and William Pelz, *The Spartakusbund and the German Working-Class Movement, 1914-1919* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987).

[iv] The fundamental continuity in the orientation of Marx and Luxemburg (along with Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci) is indicated in Paul Le Blanc, *From Marx to Gramsci: A Reader in Revolutionary Marxist Politics* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1996).

[v] *Ibid.*, 102, 131.

[vi] *Ibid.*, 99, 108, 135-136, 137, 162, 191, 216.

[vii] *Ibid.*, 127.

[viii] Rosa Luxemburg, "Organizational Question of Social Democracy," *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. by Mary-Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 128-129

[ix] Carl Schorske, *German Social Democracy, 1905-1917* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1955).

[x] Paul Frolich, *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Work* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 146-147; Peter Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg, Abridged Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 264. Also see Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Verso, 1983).

[xi] Rosa Luxemburg, "Speech to Nurnberg Congress (1908)," *Selected Political Writings*, ed. by Dick Howard (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 282-282.

[xii] Nolan, 187, 189, 193-195, 233, 243.

[xiii] *Ibid.*, 243.

[xiv] This draws from my discussion in *From Marx to Gramsci*, 72-73.

[xv] "Mass Strike, Political Party Party, and Trade Unions," *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 214.

[xvi] "The Idea of May Day on the March," *Selected Political Writings*, 319-321.

[xvii] Pelz, 286, 287, 289. Also valuable, although evaluating Luxemburg and the Spartakusbund more critically, is Chris Harman, *The Lost Revolution, Germany 1918-1923* (London: Bookmarks, 1982).