

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > On the Left (Europe) > History of the Left (Europe, except France and Britain) > Rosa Luxemburg > **The revolutionary relevance of Rosa Luxemburg**

# The revolutionary relevance of Rosa Luxemburg

Monday 26 April 2021 (Date first published: 22 April 2021).

**“A real re-foundation of communism in the twenty-first century will not be able to do without the revolutionary, Marxist, democratic, socialist and libertarian message of Rosa Luxemburg.”**

If we had to choose the distinctive feature of Rosa Luxemburg’s life and thought, it is perhaps revolutionary humanism that should be preferred. Whether in her criticism of capitalism as an inhuman system, in her struggle against militarism, colonialism and imperialism, or in her vision of an emancipated society, her utopia of a world without exploitation, without alienation and without borders, this socialist humanism runs like a red thread through all her political writings - but also her correspondence, her moving letters from prison, which have been read and read again by successive generations of young activists.

Why does this figure of a woman - Jewish and Polish, Marxist and revolutionary, tender and uncompromising, militant and intellectual - always challenge us? How is it that eighty years after her death she stays so close to us? What is the astonishing topicality of her thinking, precisely today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

I see at least three reasons for this:

First of all, in an era of capitalist globalization, neo-liberal globalization, global domination of big financial capital, the internationalization of the economy in the service of profit, speculation and accumulation, the need for an international response, a globalization of resistance, in short, for a new internationalism, is more than ever on the agenda. And few figures of the workers’ movement have embodied, as radically as Rosa Luxemburg, the internationalist idea, the categorical imperative of unity, association, cooperation, fraternity of the exploited and oppressed of all countries and continents. As we know, she was, along with Karl Liebknecht, one of the few leaders of German socialism to oppose the Sacred Union and the vote on war credits in 1914. The German imperial authorities - with the support of the social-democratic right - made her pay dearly for her consistent internationalist opposition to the war by locking her up behind bars for most of the duration of the conflict. Faced with the dramatic failure of the Second International, she dreamt of the creation of a new global association of workers and only death - that is, her assassination in January 1919 by the Freikorps, brought into Berlin by the Social Democratic Minister Noske to crush the revolt of the Spartacus League - prevented her from participating, together with Lenin and Trotsky, in the founding of the Communist International in 1919.

Few have understood, as she did, the mortal danger to workers of nationalism, chauvinism, racism, xenophobia, militarism and colonial or imperial expansionism. One can criticize this or that aspect of her reflection on the national question, but one cannot question the prophetic force of her warnings. I use the word “prophet” in the original biblical sense (so well defined by Daniel Bensaïd in his

recent writings): not the one who claims to “predict the future”, but the one who advances a conditional anticipation, the one who warns the people of the disasters that will occur if we do not take another path.

Secondly, at the end of a century that was not only that of “extremes” (Eric Hobsbawm) but that of the most brutal manifestations of barbarism in the history of mankind, one can only admire a revolutionary thought like that of Rosa Luxemburg, who was able to reject the convenient and conformist ideology of linear progress, the optimistic fatalism and the passive evolution of social democracy. , the dangerous illusion - which Walter Benjamin speaks of in his “Theses” of 1940 - that it was enough to “swim with the current”, to let the “objective conditions” do their work. In writing, in her pamphlet of 1915, *The Crisis of Social Democracy* (signed with the pseudonym “Junius”), the slogan “socialism or barbarism”, Rosa Luxemburg broke with the conception - of bourgeois origin, but adopted by the Second International - of history as irresistible progress, inevitable, “guaranteed” by the “objective” laws of economic development or social evolution. A conception marvelously summed up by Gyorgy Valentinovich Plekhanov, who wrote: “The victory of our programme is as inevitable as the birth of the sun tomorrow”. The political conclusion of this “progressive” ideology could only be passivity: no one would have the crazy idea of fighting, risking their life, fighting to ensure the morning appearance of the sun...

Let us return for a moment to the political and “philosophical” scope of the slogan “socialism or barbarism”. It is suggested in some texts of Marx and Engels, but it is Rosa Luxemburg who gives it this explicit and decisive formulation. It implies a perception of history as an open process, as a series of “bifurcations”, where the “subjective factor” - consciousness, organization, initiative - of the oppressed becomes decisive. It is no longer a question of waiting for the fruit to “ripen”, according to the “natural laws” of the economy or history, but of acting before it is too late. Because the other branch of the alternative is a sinister peril: barbarism. By this term, Rosa Luxemburg does not mean an impossible “regression” to a tribal, primitive or “savage” past: it is in her eyes a barbarism that is eminently modern, of which the First World War gave a striking example, much worse in its murderous inhumanity than the warlike practices of the “barbarian” conquerors at the end of the Roman Empire. Never in the past have such modern technologies - tanks, gas, military aviation - been put at the service of an imperialist policy of massacre and aggression on such a vast scale.

From the point of view of the history of the twentieth century, Rosa Luxemburg’s slogan was also prophetic: the defeat of socialism in Germany paved the way for the victory of Hitler’s fascism and, subsequently, the Second World War, and the most monstrous forms of modern barbarism that humanity has ever known, of which the name “Auschwitz” has become the symbol and the summary.

It is no coincidence that the expression “socialism or barbarism” served as a banner and a sign of recognition for one of the most creative groups of the Marxist left of the post-war period in France: the one around the magazine of the same name, organized during the 1950s and 60s by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort.

The choice and the warning indicated by Rosa Luxemburg’s slogan continues to be on the agenda also in our time. The long period of re-emergence of revolutionary forces - from which we are gradually beginning to emerge - has been accompanied by the proliferation of wars and massacres of “ethnic cleansing” from the Balkans to Africa, the rise of racism, chauvinism, fundamentalism of all kinds, including in the heart of “civilized” Europe.

But there is a new danger that presents itself, not foreseen by Rosa Luxemburg. Ernest Mandel pointed out in his last writings that the choice of the twenty-first century for humanity is no longer, as in 1915, “socialism or barbarism”, but “socialism or death”. He thus referred to the risk of ecological catastrophe resulting from global capitalist expansion, with its destructive logic for the

environment. If socialism does not interrupt this dizzying race to the abyss - of which the rise in the temperature of the planet and the destruction of the ozone layer are the most visible signs - it is the very survival of the human species that is threatened.

Thirdly, in the face of the historical failure of the dominant currents of the labour movement, i.e., on the one hand the inglorious collapse of so-called "real socialism" - the heir to sixty years of Stalinism - and on the other the passive submission (unless it is an active adherence?) of social democracy to the neo-liberal rules of the global capitalist game, the alternative that Rosa Luxemburg represented, i.e. a socialism that was both genuinely revolutionary and radically democratic, appears more relevant than ever.

As an activist of the workers' movement of the Tsarist Empire - she founded the Social Democratic Party of Poland and Lithuania, affiliated with the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party - she criticized the tendencies, in her opinion too authoritarian and centralist, of the theses defended by Lenin before 1905. Her criticism coincided, on this point, with that of the young Trotsky in *Our Political Tasks* (1904).

At the same time, as leader of the left wing of German social democracy, she was fighting against the tendency of the trade-union and political bureaucracy, or of parliamentary representatives, to monopolize political decisions. The Russian general strike of 1905 seemed to her an example to be followed in Germany as well: she placed more trust in the initiative of rank-and-file workers than on the well-mannered decisions of the governing bodies of the German labour movement.

Learning of the events of October 1917 while she was in prison, she immediately solidarized with the Russian revolutionaries. In a pamphlet on the Russian Revolution written in 1918 in prison, which was not published until after her death (in 1921), she enthusiastically praised this great emancipatory historical act, and paid a warm tribute to the revolutionary leaders of October:

"All the courage, the energy, the revolutionary insight, the logic that a revolutionary party can demonstrate in a historical moment was the work of Lenin, Trotsky and their friends. All the honour and the capacity for revolutionary action that is lacking in Western social democracy, have been found among the Bolsheviks. The October uprising will not only have served to effectively save the Russian revolution, but also the honour of international socialism."

This solidarity did not prevent her from criticizing what she thought was wrong or dangerous in their policy. While some of her criticisms - on national self-determination or land distribution - are questionable, and rather unrealistic, others, which touch on the question of democracy, are quite pertinent and still of remarkable relevance for today. Acknowledging the impossibility, for the Bolsheviks, in the dramatic circumstances of civil war and foreign intervention, to create "as if by magic, the most beautiful of democracies", Rosa Luxemburg drew no less attention to the danger of a certain authoritarian shift and re-affirmed some fundamental principles of revolutionary democracy:

"Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of a party - however numerous they might be - is not freedom. Freedom is always at least freedom for the one who thinks differently. (...) Without general elections, without unlimited freedom of the press and of assembly, without a free struggle between different opinions, life fades in all public institutions, vegetates, and bureaucracy remains the only active element."

It is difficult not to recognize the prophetic significance of this warning. A few years later the bureaucracy seized all power, eliminating progressively the revolutionaries of October 1917 - waiting, in the course of the 1930s, to ruthlessly exterminate them.

A real re-foundation of communism in the twenty-first century will not be able to do without the revolutionary, Marxist, democratic, socialist and libertarian message of Rosa Luxemburg.

**Michael Löwy**

---

**P.S.**

- IVP. Thursday 22 April 2021:  
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7115>