

## Marxist Without Dogma

In August 1893, when the chair called on her to speak at a session of the Zurich Congress of the Second International, Rosa Luxemburg made her way without hesitation through the crowd of delegates and activists packed into the hall. She was one of the few women present, still in the flush of youth, slight of build, and with a hip deformity that had forced her to limp since the age of five. The first impression she gave to those who saw her was of a frail creature indeed. But then, standing on a chair to make herself better heard, she soon captivated the whole audience with the skill of her reasoning and the originality of her positions. In her view, the central demand of the Polish workers' movement should not be an independent Polish state, as everyone before her had maintained. Poland was still under tripartite rule, divided between the German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires; its reunification was proving difficult to achieve, and the workers should set their sights on objectives that would generate practical struggles in the name of particular needs.

In a line of argument that she would develop in the years to come, she attacked those who concentrated on national issues and warned of the danger that the rhetoric of patriotism would be used to play down the class struggle and to push the social question into the background. There was no need to add "subjection to Polish nationality" to all the forms of oppression suffered by the proletariat. To avoid this trap, she aimed for the development of local self-government and the strengthening of cultural autonomy, which, once a socialist mode of production had been established, would serve as a bulwark against any resurgence of chauvinism and new forms of discrimination. The thrust of all these reflections was to distinguish between the national question and the issue of the nationstate. The intervention at the Zurich Congress symbolized the whole intellectual biography of a woman who should be considered among the most significant exponents of twentieth-century socialism. Born 150 years ago, on 5 March 1871, at Zamosc in Tsarist-occupied Poland, Rosa Luxemburg lived her whole life on the margins, grappling with multiple adversities and always swimming against the current. Of Jewish origin, suffering from a lifelong physical handicap, she moved to Germany at the age of 27 and managed to obtain citizenship there through a marriage of convenience. Being resolutely pacifist at the outbreak of the First World War, she was imprisoned several times for her ideas. She was a passionate enemy of imperialism during a new and violent period of colonial expansion. She fought against the death penalty in the midst of barbarism. And ~ a central dimension ~ she was a woman who lived in worlds inhabited almost exclusively by men. She was often the only female presence, both at Zurich University and in the leadership of German Social Democracy, where was appointed as the first woman to teach at its central cadre school.

These difficulties were supplemented by her independent spirit and her autonomy. Displaying a lively intelligence, she had the capacity to develop new ideas and to defend them, without awe and indeed with a disarming candour, before such figures as August Bebel and Karl Kautsky (who had had the formative privilege of direct contact with Engels). Her aim in this was not to repeat Marx's words over again, but to interpret them historically and, when necessary, to build further on them.

Luxemburg successfully overcame the many obstacles facing her, and in the fierce debate following Eduard Bernstein's reformist turn she became a wellknown figure in the foremost organization of the European workers' movement.

Whereas, in his famous text *The Preconditions of Socialism and The Tasks of Social Democracy*, Bernstein had called on the party to burn its bridges with the past and to turn itself into a merely

gradualist force, Luxemburg insisted in Social Reform or Revolution? that during every historical period “work for reforms is carried on only in the direction given it by the impetus of the last revolution”. Those who sought to achieve in the “chicken coop of bourgeois parliamentarism” the changes that the revolutionary conquest of political power would make possible were not choosing “a more tranquil, surer and slower road to the same goal”, but rather “a different goal”.

The point was not to improve the existing social order, but to build a completely different one. The role of the labour unions and the Russian Revolution of 1905 prompted some thoughts on the possible subjects and actions that might bring about a radical transformation of society. In the book *Mass Strike, Party and Trade Unions*, which analysed the main events in vast areas of the Russian Empire, Luxemburg highlighted the key role of the broadest, mostly unorganized, layers of the proletariat. In her eyes, the masses were the true protagonists of history.

On the question of organizational forms and, more specifically, the role of the party, Luxemburg was involved in another heated dispute during those years, this time with Lenin. In *Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy*, Luxemburg argued that an extremely centralized party set up a very dangerous dynamic of “blind obedience to the central authority”. The party should not stifle but develop the involvement of society, in order to achieve “the correct historical evaluation of forms of struggle”. Marx once wrote that “every step of the real movement is more important than dozens of programmes”. And Luxemburg extended this into the claim that “errors made by a truly revolutionary labour movement are historically infinitely more fruitful and more valuable than the infallibility of the best of all possible central committees”.

This clash acquired greater importance after the Soviet revolution of 1917, to which she offered her unconditional support. Worried by the events unfolding in Russia (beginning with the ways of tackling land reform), she was the first in the communist camp to observe that “a prolonged state of emergency” would have a “degrading influence on society”.

In the posthumous text *The Russian Revolution*, she emphasized that the historical mission of the proletariat, in conquering political power, was “to create a socialist democracy to replace bourgeois democracy ~ not to eliminate democracy altogether”. Communism meant “the most active, unlimited participation of the mass of the people, unlimited democracy”, which did not look to infallible leaders to guide it. Though making opposite political choices, both Social Democrats and Bolsheviks wrongly conceived of democracy and revolution as two alternative processes. For Luxemburg, on the contrary, the core of her political theory was an indissoluble unity of the two.

The other pivotal point of Luxemburg’s political convictions and activism was her twin opposition to war and agitation against militarism. Here she proved capable of updating the theoretical approach of the Left and winning support for clear-sighted resolutions at congresses of the Second International, which, though disregarded, were a thorn in the side of supporters of the First World War.

In her analysis, the function of armies, the non-stop rearmament and the repeated outbreak of wars were not to be understood only in the classical terms of nineteenth-century political thinking. Rather, they were bound up with forces seeking to repress workers’ struggles and served as useful tools for reactionary interests to divide the working class. They also corresponded to a precise economic objective of the age. Capitalism needed imperialism and war, even in peacetime, in order to increase production, as well as to capture new markets as soon as they presented themselves in the colonial periphery outside Europe.

This picture was a long way from optimistic reformist scenarios, and to sum it up Luxemburg used a formula that would resonate widely in the twentieth century: “socialism or barbarism”. She explained that the second term could be avoided only through self-aware mass struggle and, since anti-militarism required a high level of political consciousness, she was one of the greatest champions of a general strike against war ~ a weapon that many others, including Marx, underestimated.

A cosmopolitan citizen of “what is to come”, Luxemburg said she felt at home “all over the world, wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears”. For the co-founder of the Spartacist League, the class struggle was not just a question of wage increases.

She did not wish to be a mere epigone and her socialism was never economicist. Immersed in the dramas of her time, she sought to modernize Marxism without calling its foundations into question. Her efforts in this direction are a constant warning to the Left that it should not limit its political activity to bland palliatives and give up trying to change the existing state of things. The way in which she lived, her success in wedding theoretical elaboration with social agitation, offer an extraordinary lesson across time to the new generation of activists who have chosen to take up the many battles she waged.

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