

On “The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg”

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At the Marxist Literary Group’s Institute on Culture and Society 2011, held on June 20–24, 2011 at the Institute for the Humanities, University of Illinois at Chicago, Platypus members Chris Cutrone, Greg Gabrellas, and Ian Morrison organized a panel on “The Marxism of Second International Radicalism: Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky.” The original description of the event reads: The legacy of revolution 1917-19 in Russia, Germany, Hungary and Italy is concentrated above all in the historical figures Vladimir Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky, leaders of the Left in the Second International (1889-1914) — what they called ‘revolutionary social democracy’ — in the period preceding the crisis of war, revolution, counterrevolution and civil war in World War I and its aftermath. In 1920, Georg Lukács summed up this experience as follows: ‘[T]he crisis [of capital] remains permanent, it goes back to its starting-point, repeats the cycle until after infinite sufferings and terrible detours the school of history completes the education of the proletariat and confers upon it the leadership of mankind. . . . Of course this uncertainty and lack of clarity are themselves the symptoms of the crisis in bourgeois society. As the product of capitalism the proletariat must necessarily be subject to the modes of existence of its creator. . . . inhumanity and reification.’ Nonetheless, these Marxists understood their politics as being ‘on the basis of capitalism’ itself (Lenin). How were the 2nd Intl. radicals, importantly, critics, and not merely advocates, of their own political movement? What is the legacy of these figures today, after the 20th century — as Walter Benjamin said in his 1940 ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History,’ ‘against the grain’ of their time, reaching beyond it? How did Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky contribute to the potential advancement and transformation of Marxism, in and through the crisis of Marxism in the early 20th century? How can we return to these figures productively, today, to learn the lessons of their history?’ What follows is an edited version of Greg Gabrellas’s opening remarks.

DESPITE THE CONTRARY ASSERTIONS of conservatives, Marxism as a body of thought is widely known and disseminated among activists, academics, and political intellectuals. They take Marxism to mean a theory of what is wrong in the world, and how it can be



Photograph from the Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz by Herbert Hoffmann of Rosa Luxemburg in Stuttgart in 1907.

practically changed—essentially a normative political philosophy with a radical disposition. Marxism takes its seat next to feminism, queer theory and critical race studies as a philosophy of liberation. But this view is insufficient, and would have been unthinkable to the radicals of the Second International. Moreover, Marxism today is not only practically ineffectual. It stands in the way of future developments within Marxism, and with it the possibility of socialism.

This judgment might seem surprising, perhaps even shocking, to the activists, academics and intellectuals who consider themselves Marxists or at least sympathizers. There exist Marxist political organizations, journals, reading groups and conferences. Activist projects continue to arise, countering imperialist war and punitive sanctions against the poor and working class, and Marxists play a definitive role in all forms of contemporary activism. But the historical optimism implicit in activism for its own sake, manifest by the slogan “the struggle continues,” condemns itself to impotence. Marxism is different from radical political theory only insofar as it is an active recognition of possibility amidst social disintegration and calamity. Marxists have forgotten that self-critical politics is the form in which progressive developments within Marxist theory take place.

At first this inward orientation might seem misplaced. But just as modern painting recovers and transforms the aesthetic conventions of previous generations, so the radicals of the Second International understood socialism to be exclusively possible through the self-criticism and advancement of the actually-existing-history of the movement. Understandably, the splotches on a Jackson Pollock painting, or the overlapping figures of a de Kooning, might confuse first-time visitors to any museum of modern art. With its historical link severed, Marxism too risks becoming unintelligible amid the chatter of contemporary theory.

For example, in *The Crisis of German Social Democracy*, written under the pseudonym Junius while imprisoned for her opposition to world war in 1914, Rosa Luxemburg wrote,

Unsparring self-criticism is not merely an essential for its existence but the working class’s supreme duty. On our ship we have the most

valuable treasures of mankind, and the proletariat is their ordained guardian! And while bourgeois society, shamed and dishonored by the bloody orgy, rushes headlong toward its doom, the international proletariat must and will gather up the golden treasure that, in a moment of weakness and confusion in the chaos of the world war, it has allowed to sink to the ground.¹

The “most valuable treasures of mankind” to which Luxemburg refers may be necessarily cryptic, but her phrase illuminates objective social sensibilities that have since vanished. Socialism was seen by the radical masses of workers and intellectuals alike as the fulfillment of humanity’s highest social and cultural achievements. Marxism was itself a historical achievement rendered possible by the organized politics of the working class. The task of Marxist theory was the criticism of socialist politics as a means of developing Marxism itself, and with it the possibility for new social freedoms. For Luxemburg, the project of political Marxism was not simply a matter of ideology or a political program that could be right or wrong. Socialism was, as she put it in the same pamphlet, “the first popular movement in world history that has set itself the goal of bringing human consciousness, and thereby free will, into play in the social actions of mankind.” In the wake of this movement’s crisis and ultimate collapse in the twentieth century, we must struggle to discern why and how this nearly forgotten generation of workers, intellectuals and students came closest to achieving a real utopia.

If the intervening history has rendered this historical optimism suspect, then it is to Luxemburg’s lasting credit that she passed judgment on the failure of the Left before barbarism itself had the last word. By declaring Social Democracy a “stinking corpse” in 1915, with its resignation in the face of national chauvinism and a looming world war, Luxemburg purposefully cast “the last forty-five year period [1870-1915] in the development of the modern labor movement...in doubt.”² Luxemburg’s readers must have found this judgment shocking, since it corresponded to the rise of mass democratic parties and trade unions—historically new institutions, but ones that seemed to many socialists to ensure their political victory. That a disciplined leader of the revolutionary movement could criticize the foundation of the modern labor movement itself illustrates the keen historical integrity of Luxemburg’s Marxism. Fortified by her theoretical will to “self-criticism, remorseless, cruel,” she politically challenged and tried to demolish the regressive political and ideological tendencies within her own movement.³ She saw these as symptoms of the bourgeois social order in decline. Unable to contain the contradiction between the immense capacity to generate wealth and the intensifying fragmentation and attenuation of individual freedom, bourgeois society became repetitive, caught in the mythological repeat of the failure of revolution. This posed both a problem and an opportunity for the revolutionary left, which participated in mass institutions but only as a means to furthering human freedom by reconstructing society on a wholly new basis.

But the “crisis of German Social Democracy” revealed the extent to which the Left had become its own worst enemy. Rosa Luxemburg sought to crystallize this trauma, rendering it

available to theoretical diagnosis and intervention. Her criticism was a necessary political attempt at achieving the historical consciousness required for the realization of socialism. For example, in her final political work she understood herself and her comrades on the Left to be returning, under changed conditions, to a moment of revolutionary potential occupied much earlier by the authors of *The Communist Manifesto*. She observed in 1918, at the founding congress of the German Communist Party (KPD), “the course of the historical dialectic has led us back to the point at which Marx and Engels stood in 1848 when they first unfurled the banner of international socialism. We stand where they stood, but with the advantage that seventy additional years of capitalist development lie behind us.”⁴ Luxemburg argued that the Left had lived for many years in the dark shadow cast by the failure of revolution in 1848. While industrial development spurred the development of wealth-generating machines on an ever-expanding scale, the working class organized itself on an increasingly collectivist basis that threatened to compromise the emancipatory impulse behind Marx’s politics. Henceforth, “Marxist” politics was defined by its attempt to overcome the dead hand of this history.

Marxism, for Rosa Luxemburg, was not simply an insight into the ‘objective’ laws of capitalist development; rather, it was a kind of immanent knowledge, *itself bound up* in that very development. Her life’s work might be described as an ongoing attempt at “revolutionary cognition,” in which her politics were inextricable from her most inspired theoretical contributions.⁵ In this work she was continuing the project of Marx and Engels, for whom the proletariat does not enter the historical arena preformed, but develops in a form suitable to revolutionary consciousness. According to *The Communist Manifesto*, the workers of the early period of bourgeois society do not recognize themselves as a class, but with the emergence of the factory system and large-scale industry, and after the labor process is thoroughly transformed by machinery, “the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes.” In other words, class struggle is not the default of bourgeois society, but its achievement.

This achievement marks the turning point in history, for although the bourgeoisie protects its own interests, it nevertheless comes into conflict with itself as a class. It finds itself in a “constant battle,” surrounded on all sides by global competition with other producers. Hence it “sees itself compelled to appeal to the proletariat, to ask for its help, and thus, to drag it into the political arena. The bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education.” The proletariat, in turn, gradually rises above its own divisions of a class through political agitation for social reform: “It compels legislative recognition of particular interests of the workers, by taking advantage of the divisions of the bourgeoisie itself.”⁶ This movement is complemented by the bourgeoisie’s own disintegration as a class, in which “a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole,” break away and join the proletariat, “the class that holds the future in its hands.”⁷ It is this process of social disintegration and re-

formation through class struggle that Marx and Engels suggested socialism would be achieved. They described it as, “the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.”⁸

If social disintegration continued well after the failed revolutions of 1848, for which Marx and Engels wrote the Manifesto, so too did the growth of class-conscious political organization that transformed the modern world. Marxist theorists sought to understand the new possibilities opened up by parliamentary Social Democracy, and hoped to push the natural tendency forward. It seemed that history was on the side of socialism. This was the context of historical optimism in which the German Social-Democratic Party was formed in 1875. Luxemburg intervened in the so-called “revisionist controversy” with her pamphlet *Social Reform or Revolution?* in order to clarify the real historical stakes of this confusion. Since the foundation of the Second International, political policy, which was more often than not informed by Marxian theory, came up against the immediate interests of the trade union leadership, which viewed its own immediate struggles as taking priority over the “political” decisions made by the congresses. Although the modern Social-Democratic parties were united within the Socialist International, organized constituencies within the parties—notably the parliamentary delegations and the trade union leadership—could create friction and block implementation of socialist strategy. An early instance of this was the protest of German trade union leaders against the International’s decision to call a workers’ holiday on May Day in 1890, shortly after the Haymarket massacre. This political tendency found an unlikely supporter in Eduard Bernstein, a longstanding member of German Social Democracy and one of its foremost Marxist theorists.

Bernstein argued that the very success of the social-democratic Left made Marx’s “revolutionary” predictions, and his politics, obsolete. The development of credit and cartels had stabilized capitalist crises; the trade unions had begun to increase wages; and universal democracy could gradually be brought into being by legislative reforms. Luxemburg criticized Bernstein’s one-sided approach to historical reality. By abandoning Marx’s own approach of viewing society as a whole, Bernstein preferred to view certain social phenomena, like credit, as *disjecta membra*, dislocated fragments. He failed to consider working-class politics integral to the reproduction of capitalist society, which logically led him to political fatalism and unwarranted historical optimism. Although some of her arguments are sharp criticisms of Bernstein’s interpretations of facts, Luxemburg’s central critiques strike at the heart of the issue: how the conditions of immediate struggle in bourgeois society point beyond themselves to a socialist future.

In her pamphlet *Social Reform or Revolution?*, Luxemburg took aim at the notion that immediate gains that lead to forms of “social control,” such as labor legislation, are in themselves the content of socialism. Why insist on some fantastical ideal when we can make progressive changes to improve working conditions in the here and now? But Luxemburg was not satisfied: such struggles are, she insisted, a “labor of Sisyphus”—necessary as defensive measures, but inadequate to eliminate exploitation in the social system predicated on the compulsion of wage earners to sell

their labor. She struggled against the political and ideological tendency, internal to the socialist movement itself, of pushing up and defending bourgeois society, but from the perspective of the immediate interests of the working class, voiced by the trade unions. Luxemburg was not against workers’ self-organization as such. But she called on Marxists to recognize that the new forms of organization were potentially straitjackets on bourgeois society in decline and not the dawning of socialism.

Rosa Luxemburg’s role in the revisionist dispute reinforced the saliency of Marxism within the Marxist movement. In place of revolutionary consciousness, Marxist theory became increasingly absorbed by a regressive immediacy of working class politics. The result was not simply a struggle of Marxists against trade-union leaders, but a struggle within Marxism itself. Luxemburg and her allies, including Lenin in the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party, took their “orthodoxy” to demand constant attention to the historical whole of humanity, not individual parts. Her work clearly underscores the political significance of theoretical matters. She herself insisted, “No coarser insult, no baser defamation, can be thrown against the workers than the remark ‘Theoretical controversies are only for intellectuals.’”⁹ The betrayal of revolutionary politics, indicated by acquiescence to inter-imperial war, vindicated Luxemburg’s bitter struggle to overcome the emerging ideology which opposed the revolutionary change sought by the left wing of the Second International.

By the time of the German Revolution in 1918, in which sailors’ mutinies resulted in the formation of Councils of Workers and Soldiers’ Deputies led by reluctant Socialists who had just recently inherited state power, Luxemburg identified a distinct need to transfer the masses of workers from their membership in the German Social Democracy to the revolution. What for us appears as a philosophy of history was, for her, the development of a Marxist politics worthy of the name. She wrote, “The first illusion of the workers and soldiers who made the revolution was: the illusion of unity under the banner of so-called socialism.”¹⁰ By raising broader theoretical problems that inevitably influenced the nature of capitalist society and the revolutionary process itself, Luxemburg was not merely an organizer—she gave conscious form to the previously latent crisis in bourgeois society, providing political leadership in the struggle to construct a new social world.

Coda

Peer into a high-powered telescope, and you can witness the auratic glow of an archaic cosmic explosion—the origins—racing away from us at light speed. A similarly spectral shockwave marks the horizon of modern political experience, and it is also cataclysmic, though it goes largely unnoticed. The trauma includes the unnecessary suffering and death wrought by the miscarried socialist revolutions of the twentieth century, the failure of which made possible the unprecedented mass slaughter in Nazi death camps—humanity’s self-immolation; it is the past that weighs heavier than ever like a nightmare on our brains. The Left in its various political manifestations is not exempt: the accumulating catastrophe is everything we say, do, and think. We can try to

escape from this nightmare, and move on, we can try to discard Marxism, even ideology itself. But we cannot forget what we do not fully remember. And yet that smudge of light we see in our telescopes, nearly invisible to the naked eye, is about as hazy and irrelevant to our contemporary concerns as Marxism. How is it possible that this now discarded relic can help illuminate our present?

The Ancients once used the stars in constellation to find the proper place of humanity in the cosmos. Looking back to the moment of Luxemburg's murder, we survey the ruins of a historical accomplishment unprecedented in the history of humanity. If we capture a glimpse of the Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg, it is antiquity to our own. Nonetheless, perhaps it is an important part of the constellation we need. Christopher Lasch once wrote that radicals after the New Left could only relate to the past through either blind rejection or complete identification with exemplary predecessors. Both tendencies are pathological. Lasch likens this to a personality disorder in psychoanalytic theory, in which a fraught relationship to one's childhood, the lack of a Golden Age of youth, leads either to mania or depression, or perhaps both. Considering the problems confronting Marxism today, there are no easily drawn conclusions to be made, but rather ways of questioning the world that elucidate and advance historical tendencies now forgotten.

The Renaissance painters and philosophers looked to the ruins of Greek and Roman civilization to nourish their burgeoning self-consciousness and cultural achievements, heralding the dawn of a new age while rediscovering and transforming the value of the old. So we might still recognize in our times the wreckage of humanity's highest hopes, crystallized in the failure of the Marxist project in general, and of Rosa Luxemburg's Marxism in particular. But to do so we must see in ourselves—in every protest, every demonstration, and every factory takeover—the obstacle, insofar as it occludes historical consciousness and ensnares us in the immediacy of our present. We are not at the verge of a new beginning, but the tail end of an epoch-making project that once sought to change the world. Since the historical continuity is broken, this project can be taken up again only if we can somehow bring forgotten historical tendencies to consciousness—to render the faint memory of revolutionary socialism intelligible through self-criticism. While our own capacity to pose theoretical problems in the present is confounded, we might instead allow the past to ask questions of the present. Looking backwards is now the only way to move forwards.

1. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Crisis of German Social Democracy (The Junius Pamphlet)", 1915. <www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/>.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Rosa Luxemburg, "Our Program and the Political Situation," in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, eds. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 363.
5. J.P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 336.
6. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 481.
7. Ibid., 481.
8. Ibid., 482.
9. Rosa Luxemburg, "Social Reform or Revolution," in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, eds. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 130.
10. Luxemburg, "Our Program," 367.