

The revolutionary movements of the year 2011, above all in the Arab countries, and the life and thought of Rosa Luxemburg, are connected. Presented at the Anarchist Book Fair, London -- Editors

Red Rosa and the Arab Spring

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This talk is titled “Red Rosa and the Arab Spring” and in it I shall try to weave together two strands: the revolutionary movements of the year 2011, above all in the Arab countries; and the life and thought of Rosa Luxemburg, the great revolutionary who was active a century ago, born in Poland in 1871 and killed in Germany in the defeated revolution of 1919.

This talk will also, I hope, show the influence of Raya Dunayevskaya (1910 – 1987), the founder, in the United States, of the body of ideas that we call Marxist-Humanism, whose 1982 book, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, I reread while preparing this talk. However, within that tradition, the views expressed here are my own.

What has become known as the Arab Spring began in the winter of 2010 with an act of tragedy and despair. In a small Tunisian town, a young man who had been refused a licence to pursue his trade as a fruit seller burned himself to death.

Outrage at this appalling event brought on the mass protests that ousted the Tunisian dictator Zine al Abadine Ben Ali. Success in Tunisia galvanised the mass movements in Egypt that drove Hosni Mubarak from power. All across the region, regimes whose tenure on power had seemed secure suddenly seemed vulnerable. Protests spread rapidly across the region from Bahrain in the east to Morocco in the west.

Regimes of very different ideological complexion seemed equally at risk, whether a conservative monarchy like Bahrain or a state like Libya that professed a radical socialist ideology; whether they had a foreign policy conciliatory to Israel, as did Egypt, or militantly anti-Israel, like Syria.

Most of these countries shared a similar demography – a higher proportion of young people than in the West, combined with high levels of youth unemployment.

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They also had in common a powerful and much feared political police – *mukhabarat* in Arabic - and widespread use of torture against dissidents.

Rosa Luxemburg also lived in a time of revolutions. She was an actual participant, in Poland, in the revolution in the Tsarist Russian Empire of 1905–6. She was a critical supporter of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and after. Finally, she was a leader of the German Revolution of 1918–1919, when she was murdered by counter-revolutionary troops belonging to the *Freikorps*.

Speaking here in London in 1907, Luxemburg gave this assessment of the Russian Revolution of 1905–1906:

“...the Russian Revolution is not just the last act in a series of bourgeois revolutions in the 19th Century, but rather the forerunner of a new series of future proletarian revolutions, in which the conscious proletariat and its vanguard, the Social-Democracy, are destined for the historic role of leader”

There are two elements to this prediction: the idea that the world was entering an era of proletarian, socialist revolutions; and the assertion that the Social-Democracy (which is to say socialist parties affiliated to the Second International) would provide the coming revolutions with leadership.

We will return in a little while to the question of the party and leadership. For the moment, let's examine Luxemburg's view that the Russian Revolution of 1905 heralded a new period of workers' revolutions.

On this point, Luxemburg was prescient. The following decades did see a series of attempts at workers' revolutions, from Russia in 1917, Germany in 1918, Spain in 1936, Hungary in 1956, right up to Portugal in 1974 and Iran in 1979, although none were ultimately successful. Luxemburg herself argued that some defeats were inevitable before eventual victory, but she could not foresee the great tragedy of revolutions that were either defeated or transformed into opposite from within.

The revolutions of the late 20th Century and the 21st Century so far have had a different character. They have been political revolutions against dictatorship and for democracy, but have not sought to change the underlying mode of production, capitalism.

The prototype of this modern wave of democratic revolutions was, I suggest, the people's power revolution of 1986 in the Philippines that overthrew the dictator Marcos. Then came the overthrow of all those state-capitalist regimes calling themselves Communist, in 1989 and after; and the end of Apartheid and the birth of the new South Africa in 1994. This is not to deny that these revolutions often included an important proletarian dimension, with strikes and formation of independent unions, but the working class never approached the point of taking overall power in society.

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The Arab revolutions have begun in this same pattern, revolutions in the realm of politics, against dictatorship and for democracy. One reason is that some of the regimes professed a revolutionary socialist and anti-imperialist ideology, even as they stifled the political life of the masses and harshly punished all dissent, while members of the elite lived in extravagant luxury and amassed vast personal fortunes. So the language and rhetoric of socialism have been polluted and many people regard the idea of socialism as toxic.

Even so, working class demands against capitalism have been raised, especially in Egypt. The Arab Spring has inspired anti-capitalist protests in many other countries. These revolutions have not yet run their course, and the possibility that they will develop into social as well as political revolutions remains open.

If Rosa Luxemburg were able to observe and comment upon today's Arab revolutions, she would fully share in their desire for freedom and democracy, and be inspired by the courage and determination of so many people fighting for these goals. At the same time, I think she would be perturbed by how far the idea of democracy and the idea of socialism have become disconnected.

Of all the leading figures in the revolutionary socialist tradition, Luxemburg was clearest and most consistent about the need for democracy before, during and after the revolution.

In Luxemburg's thought, socialism is impossible, even unthinkable, without the most thoroughgoing democracy, while she also believed that democracy could not be truly realised without the achievement of socialism. This meant the active, conscious involvement of the masses in decision making and running society, together with free and open debate, freedom of expression for all schools of thought and all points of view.

Luxemburg's political life unfolded in two empires. She was born, grew up and began her activities in Poland, then a subject nation within the autocratic Russian Empire. She returned there at the very end of 1905 to take part in the revolution. Most of her adult life she spent in imperial Germany.

As is well known, Luxemburg fought a long-running dispute with the leaders of her own party, the German Social-Democracy, in part over their excessive reliance on parliamentary politics. She was, however, no dogmatic anti-parliamentarian. After recognising the importance of the mass strike, or political general strike, in the Russian Revolution of 1905, she advocated its use in Germany in the struggle for a democratic electoral franchise – one person, one vote. That was in the decade before the First World War, when seizure of power by the workers was not yet on the immediate agenda. In the revolutionary crisis of 1918-19, Luxemburg's organisation, the *Spartakusbund*, called for the abolition of parliament and for power to be taken by the workers' councils.

Luxemburg's most powerful statements on the need for democracy during and after the revolution come in her critique of the Bolsheviks. Her pamphlet *The Russian Revolution*

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was an unfinished draft, published only after her death. It should be borne in mind that her commentary relates only to the first few months of Bolshevik power. Her position with regard to Lenin and the Bolsheviks was one of high praise combined with sharp critique.

In a famous passage, she wrote: “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. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently”.

This freedom was not to be postponed until sometime after the revolution. She wrote: “Socialist democracy begins simultaneously with the demolition of class rule and the construction of socialism”.

While Luxemburg clearly opposed the Bolsheviks’ turn away from socialist democracy and towards dictatorship and red terror, she showed considerable understanding of the difficulties faced by a revolution isolated in a single country, and called for the international proletariat, especially in Germany, to come to the aid of beleaguered Russia. However, her perspectives for Germany sought to avoid the trap of taking power without adequate mass support.

“The Spartacus League will never assume governing power in any way other than through the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian mass in all Germany, never in any way other than on the strength of the masses’ conscious agreement with the views, aims and methods of struggle of the Spartacus League.”
“The victory of the Spartacus League is not at the beginning but at the end of the revolution: it is identical with the victory of the great millions-strong masses of the socialist proletariat”.

We noted earlier that Luxemburg understood the nature of her own epoch as a time of proletarian revolutions, “in which the conscious proletariat, and its vanguard, the Social-Democracy, are destined for the historic role of leader”. Let’s look now at the second element, the question of organisation, party and leadership.

For most of her political life, Luxemburg was an internal critic of the German Social-Democracy, the greatest mass socialist party of the age. She was also an external critic of the highly centralised revolutionary party as devised by Lenin.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the German Social-Democracy could plausibly be seen as the model socialist organisation. It had survived a period of persecution, Bismarck’s anti-socialist laws. Its membership had grown to around a million. Grouped around it were a host of cultural and sporting organisations. Moreover, it was formally and officially a revolutionary organisation. Eduard Bernstein had openly argued for a reformist perspective in his book *Evolutionary Socialism*, and this had been rejected by the party leaders, Karl Kautsky and August Bebel.

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Luxemburg, however, perceived two flaws in this seemingly impressive party: its inclination towards parliamentary politics and aversion towards mass activity, and the weakness of its opposition to imperialism. In the conventional thinking of the socialist movement, the workers of Poland and Russia, who were not organised in a mass party or unions, were “backward” in comparison to the highly organised German working class. Luxemburg saw how, in an actual revolutionary period, the thoughts and actions of ordinary people could race ahead. She wrote:

“The element of spontaneity, as we have seen, plays a great part in all Russian mass strikes without exception, be it as a driving force or as a restraining influence... In short, in the mass strikes in Russia, the element of spontaneity plays such a predominant part, not because the Russian proletariat are ‘uneducated’, but because revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them.”

She also disputed Lenin’s insistence on the need for a tightly centralised and disciplined revolutionary party. She certainly shared Lenin’s concern about the problem of opportunism, in other words the tendency to reduce socialist politics in practice to seeking reforms within capitalism. But she insisted that a rigid centralism was not the antidote. She wrote: “The mistakes that are made by a truly revolutionary workers’ movement are, historically speaking, more fruitful and valuable than the best possible ‘Central Committee’”.

However, even Luxemburg, who recognised the creativity of the workers in the mass strike, did not – at that time – make a special category of the soviets or councils of workers and peasants. That recognition came later. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, and with the onset of revolution in Germany in 1918, Luxemburg and her comrades of the Spartacus League did call for power to the workers’ councils.

With the privilege of historic hindsight, we may wonder why it was that so great a theoretician as Luxemburg missed so important a new form of organisation as the soviets, in her assessment of the revolution of 1905-1906. I think this shows how difficult it can be to embrace a new category in our thinking, to recognise a truly new historical development.

An element of 21st Century revolutions, in the Arab world and elsewhere, that many have identified as new is the use of internet based methods of communication, especially new social media, to share information, expose state brutality and coordinate protests. This has led some observers to coin the sobriquet “Facebook Revolutions”.

A Facebook page “We are all Khaled Said” was set up in memory of a young Egyptian who was beaten and killed by police. This page had over a million followers in the original Arabic.

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Where foreign journalists and television crews are banned, or simply when events move too quickly or happen too widely for to be covered by traditional news media, people are able to take videos on mobile phones and post them on YouTube. Information is disseminated via blogs such as tortureinegypt.net, and Twitter feeds allow instant communication about protests and state repression.

However helpful to protesters these technologies may be, they are supplementary to mass protests in public places like Cairo's Tahrir Square or Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain. So a term like "Facebook Revolutions" is one-sided, if not entirely inappropriate, as it detracts from the physical courage of people gathering in defiance of state repression and brutality.

To speak of "Facebook Revolutions" also implies that the alternative to dictatorship, kleptocracy and crony capitalism is a freewheeling, libertarian capitalism as represented by internet businesses like Facebook, where a young person with a bright idea can become a billionaire almost overnight. Such a philosophy opposes the tyranny of the state, but not the tyranny in the factories where all those smart phones and notepad computers are assembled. The clash between that definition of freedom, and the idea of a classless society of freely-associated producers holding the means of production in common, may be suspended while all are united in the fight against dictatorship, but it must come to the fore sooner or later.

By way of conclusion, I suggest that some of Rosa Luxemburg's ideas can guide us today. I have singled out socialist democracy and mass spontaneity. As Marxist-Humanists, we do not agree with her about everything: we don't subscribe to some of her economic theories, and we criticise her dogmatic rejection of national liberation movements, in particular in her native Poland.

As Lieutenant Columbo would say, there's just one more thing: her sheer vibrant humanity and passion, a personality that combined burning indignation with joy in life and human potential.

In a letter to her friend Mathilde Wurm, Rosa wrote:

"...see to it that you stay human... Being human means joyfully throwing your whole life 'on the scales of destiny' when need be, but all the while rejoicing in every sunny day and every beautiful cloud. Ach, I know of no formula to write you for being human..."