

# The Two-Fold Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg

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Far from being any distant memory, the legacy of Rosa Luxemburg continues to impact the major ideological and social struggles of our time. One reflection of this was the debate which broke out a year ago, in April 2003, over the Cuban government's decision to impose jail sentences (ranging from six to 28 years) on 75 dissidents and to summarily execute three Black Cubans who tried to commandeer a boat to Florida.

In response to these actions, Eduardo Galeano, the longtime anti-imperialist activist and theorist who has long supported the Cuban Revolution, wrote:

The Cuban government is now committing acts that, as Uruguayan writer Carlos Quijano would say, "sin against hope." Rosa Luxemburg, who gave her life for the socialist revolution, disagreed with Lenin over the project of a new society. Her words of warning proved prophetic, and 85 years after she was assassinated in Germany she is still right: "Freedom for only the supporters of the government, however many there may be, is not real freedom. Real freedom is freedom for those who think differently."

Galeano also quoted Luxemburg's statement from the same work, *THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION*, that "Without general elections, without freedom of the press and unlimited freedom of assembly, without a contest of free opinions, life stagnates and withers in all public institutions, and the bureaucracy becomes the only active element."<sup>(1)</sup>

Galeano's comments helped ignite a firestorm of controversy inside and outside of Cuba. Responding to Galeano in *GRANMA*, Heinz Dietrich Steffan wrote:

Whether Rosa Luxemburg or Lenin was right is a lengthy debate. What does not require debate is the logical status of her famous affirmation of the freedom of others. Just like Voltaire's congenial aphorism on liberty 150 years previously, and Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, these are abstract and general pronouncements that do not serve to

resolve concrete difficulties. ...if one affirms that “freedom is always the freedom of others,” it has to be said that this axiom is valid when the others are called Adolf Hitler or Ariel Sharon or George Bush and his subalterns.(2)

### **DEMOCRACY AND SOCIALISM**

Rosa Luxemburg would no doubt be puzzled to hear her name coupled with that of Kant or Voltaire, since they were not figures that she held in especially high regard. Even more importantly, she would no doubt be disturbed to hear that 85 years after her death the Left is still debating whether or not democracy and freedom are integral dimensions of social transformation.

The two were never separate in her mind, and it is precisely THIS dimension of Rosa Luxemburg’s legacy which takes on renewed importance in light of the crisis the radical movement is now facing in articulating and developing a positive alternative to the global dominance of capitalism.

It goes without saying that Luxemburg lived in an era that was dramatically different from our own. Yet her APPROACH to political crises speaks powerfully to our changed world, in that she refused to separate fervent opposition to capitalism-imperialism from a critique of radical tendencies and ideas which fall short of projecting the IDEA of human freedom as the essence of socialism.

The fact that we live at a moment when the power of U.S. imperialism seems virtually unchallenged and unchallengeable, which has led many on the Left to accommodate themselves (openly or implicitly) with ANY force opposing it, no matter how restrictive or even reactionary it may be, shows that we still have much to learn from Rosa Luxemburg’s legacy.

Luxemburg was one of the most principled opponents of imperialism in the history of Marxism. Whatever one thinks of her theory of expanded reproduction in THE ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL or her opposition to demands for national self-determination (and I have strong criticisms about her views on both of these counts), it is simply not true that she ignored the struggles of colonized peoples or that she was only concerned with the oppression faced by European workers.

Her ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL is replete with descriptions of the horrors of imperialist expansion in Algeria, India, South America, Africa, and East Asia. She attacked the way British imperialism “was fought on the backs of the Negroes” and she sharply opposed the destruction of indigenous and noncapitalist social relations in what

we now call the Third World. The whole point of her greatest theoretical work, *THE ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL*, were to show that the ravages of imperialism was not driven by political policies or corrupt personalities but by the very nature of capitalism.

Luxemburg's attentiveness and sensitivity to conditions in the non-European world becomes even more evident from material that now appears in *THE ROSA LUXEMBURG READER*, some of it published in English for the first time.

### **ATTENTIVENESS TO NON-WESTERN WORLD**

*THE READER* contains the first English-language translation of parts of her *INTRODCUTION TO POLITICAL ECONOMY* which deal with the destruction of indigenous communal formations in precapitalist societies. Instead of emphasizing the "backwardness" of such formations, she singled out their "extraordinary tenacity and stability...[their] elasticity and adaptability." "Communist ownership of the means of production," she wrote, "afforded, as the basis of a rigorously organized economy, the most productive social labor process and the best assurance of its continuity and development for many epochs."(3)

In the same period in which Luxemburg wrote her *INTRODCUTION TO POLITICAL ECONOMY*, she also wrote a manuscript on Greek and Roman slavery, in which she took issue with Engels for tying the emergence of slavery to the rise of private property. This piece is also included in *THE READER* in English for the first time.

Her studies on precapitalism included not only early European societies like ancient Greece or the Germanic tribes, but also a wide variety of non-Western societies, some of them still functioning, albeit in decline, in her lifetime: the Russian mir, the traditional villages of India, the Bororo of the Amazon, the Inca Empire, the Lunda Empire of South Central Africa, the Kabyles of North Africa, and Australian aborigines.

All this was written in a period when European Marxists—including the most radical and anti-imperialist among them—paid little or no attention to developments in large parts of the non-Western world.

There is hardly a single mention of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-11 in any European Marxist of the period, including Lenin, Trotsky, and Pannekoek. And even when Africa was mentioned (which was rare), such figures said virtually nothing about sub-Saharan Africa.

Not so with Luxemburg. Her discussion of the Empire of Mwata Kazembe in South Central Africa and how “the intrusion of European civilization was a disaster in every sense for primitive social relations” is unique among European Marxists of the period. In opposing German imperialism’s effort to exterminate the Nama and Herero peoples in modern-day Namibia, she wrote, “the Negroes in Africa, with whose bodies the Europeans play a game of catch, are just as near to me” as the “suffering of the [European] Jews.”(4)

No, Luxemburg was not just concerned with European workers. Nor was “imperialism” a swear word for her, as if it were the mere result of a “conspiracy” engineered by a “cabal” of reactionaries.

As she put it in her famous Junius pamphlet, “Imperialism is not the creation of any one or of any group of states. It is a product of a particular stage of ripeness in the world development of capital, an innately international condition, an indivisible whole, that is recognizable only in all its relations, and from which no nation can hold aloof at will.”(5)

### **CRITIQUE OF LENINISM**

And yet, and yet, and yet... Did Luxemburg’s fervent opposition to imperialism, which repeatedly brought her into direct conflict with the reformist leaders of the Second International, mean that she remained silent about the authoritarian tendencies of revolutionaries who opposed imperialism? Hardly.

She never adopted a one-sided critique of imperialism by ignoring the limitations of those opposed to capitalism who fail to pose socialism and human liberation as inseparables. This is most powerfully seen, of course, in her critique of the Bolsheviks in 1918—in the very period when they were facing an array of internal and external attacks by counter-revolutionary forces. Luxemburg’s support for the Bolshevik Revolution and her opposition to the compromises and betrayals of the Cadets, the Mensheviks, and many other tendencies did not stop her from sharply critiquing Lenin and his associates for “making a virtue out of necessity” by stifling democratic deliberation and debate after the seizure of power.

As she wrote in *THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION*, “It is the historic task of the proletariat, once it has attained power, to create socialist democracy in place of bourgeois democracy, not to do away with democracy altogether.” She would settle for nothing less because, she insisted, “socialist practice means a total spiritual transformation in the masses degraded by centuries of bourgeois class rule.”(6)

Though many have argued that Luxemburg dropped many of her criticisms of the Bolsheviks after being released from prison in November 1918 and therefore chose not to publish her pamphlet on THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION (it was first published after her death in 1922, by Paul Levi) we now know from letters that have recently come to light that this was not the case.(7) She fully intended to publish her critique of the Revolution, though her plans were cut short by her murder in January 1919 by counter-revolutionaries who were spurred on by leaders of German Social Democracy.

More recently, an even more unfounded myth has surfaced regarding Luxemburg's critique of the Russian Revolution—namely, that her critique of Lenin was based on a reticence on her part about the need to seize power and take the “historic initiative” in the battle against capitalism.

Contrary to claims made by Slavoj Zizek, Luxemburg's critique of Lenin, whom she overall SUPPORTED, had nothing to do with reticence about endorsing the means needed to defeat counter-revolution.

Zizek writes, “We should reject this blackmail (as Lukács does à propos of Luxemburg): there are no ‘democratic (procedural) rules’ one is a priori prohibited to violate. Revolutionary politics is not a matter of ‘opinions,’ but of the truth on behalf of which one often is compelled to disregard the ‘opinion of the majority’ and to impose the revolutionary will against it.... Lenin was right: after the revolution, the anarchic disruptions of the disciplinary constraints of production should be replaced by an even stronger discipline.”(8)

What is completely missing in Zizek's account is any confrontation with the problem of how to ensure that a new ruling class does not emerge once a revolution stifles the self-development and freedom of the masses. All that is of concern to Zizek is how to “make” the revolution and maintain power in the face of counter-revolutionary attacks from outside. But the problem of our era is not how to “make” the revolution.

The problem of our era is how to ensure that revolutions do not transform into their opposite and become the basis for a new kind of tyranny. It has happened again and again and again over the past 100 years. And it is this reality—the fact that counter-revolution has repeatedly emerged from WITHIN revolution—that helps explain the present global dominance of U.S. imperialism. The disastrous legacy of Stalinism as well as other authoritarian tendencies which subverted democracy and freedom after “seizing state power” has done far more damage to the idea of socialism than any amount of propaganda cooked up by bourgeois forces.

### **AGAINST IMPERIALISM AND NARROW ANTI-IMPERIALISM**

Unless we speak to how to overcome this tendency of revolutions and radical movements to transform into their opposite once democracy, individual freedom, and self-expression is repressed, it is impossible to break through the ideological armament of existing capitalism which declares that “there is no alternative.”

It is precisely this issue which makes Rosa Luxemburg so alive to us today. Rosa left a dual or two-fold legacy, in that she projected fervent opposition to all forms of capitalism-imperialism while never wavering from criticizing those tendencies within the anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements which failed to grasp the importance of spontaneous initiative, freedom of thought, and democratic deliberation.

The fact that she was one of the most important women in the history of European socialism (THE ROSA LUXEMBURG READER also contains several writings by her on women that have never appeared before in English) may have much to do with her refusal to put aside a critique of revolutionaries for the sake of maintaining a “united front” against the “common enemy.”(9) Whether or not her two-fold legacy can be explained by an unspoken feminist dimension on her part (an issue that is still a matter of much debate, although the writings on women contained in THE ROSA LUXEMBURG READER show that she had far more interest in women’s struggles than has generally been attributed to her), Luxemburg’s overall approach speaks powerfully to us today, faced as we are with a U.S. drive for single world mastery on the one hand, and reactionary forces like Islamic fundamentalism contending for the mantle of “anti-imperialism,” on the other.

We have surely reached a critical point when Tariq Ali, the editor of NEW LEFT REVIEW uncritically hails the “armed resistance” in Iraq to the U.S. invasion and occupation of that country in the months following March 2003, even though this same “armed resistance” was responsible for murdering Kurdish activists, threatening to kill independent Iraqi feminists like Yanar Mohammed, and murdering 140 unarmed Shiite pilgrims in Iraq in a suicide-bomb attack.(10)

Undifferentiated support for anyone opposing U.S. imperialism will not help us break through the reigning ideological notion that “there is no alternative” to capitalism. It will only reinforce it.

The reason that many on the Left have fallen into the trap of extending such undifferentiated support to anyone opposed to the U.S., no matter how reactionary they may be (a problem exhibited as well in the failure of much of the Left to come to the aid

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of the Bosnians and Kosovars who faced genocidal attacks from Milosevic's Serbia), does not of course result from any particular love on their part for fundamentalism. It flows from a failure to meet the challenge of projecting a positive alternative to all forms of capitalism, imperialism, racism, and sexism.

As Raya Dunayevskaya put it in her study of Luxemburg back in 1982:

Without a new vision of revolutions, a new individual, a new universal, a new society, new human relations, we would be forced to tail-end one or another form of reformism just when the age of nuclear Titans...threatens the very survival of civilization as we have known it. The myriad crises in our age have shown, over and over again, from Russia to China, from Cuba to Iran, from Africa to Pol Pot's Cambodia, that without a philosophy of revolution activism spends itself in mere anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism, without ever revealing what it is for.(11)

Let us return with new eyes to the work of Rosa Luxemburg, not just for her sake, but to work out unresolved philosophic-theoretic problems of revolution which are central to our life and times. We owe no less to her and we owe no less to ourselves.

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### Notes

1. 1. “Cuba Hurts,” by Eduardo Galeano, *THE PROGRESSIVE*, June 2003.
2. “Saramago, Galeano, and Fidel Castro,” by Heinz Dietrich Steffan, *GRANMA INTERNATIONAL*, April 24, 2003.
3. See “The Dissolution of Primitive Communism” in *THE ROSA LUXEMBURG READER*, edited by Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Books, 2004), pp. 110 ff.
4. See Luxemburg’s letter to Mathilde Wurm of February 16, 1917, in *THE ROSA LUXEMBURG READER*, p. 390.
5. The Junius Pamphlet, in *THE ROSA LUXEMBURG READER*, p. 326.
6. The Russian Revolution, in *THE ROSA LUXEMBURG READER*, p. 306.
7. See Felix Tych, “Drei unbekante Briefe Rosa Luxemburgs über die Oktoberrevolution,” in *IWK Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutsche Arbeiterbewegung* 27:3 (1991), pp. 357-66.
8. See Slavoj Zizek, “George Lukács as the Philosopher of Lenin,” in *A DEFENSE OF HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS: TAILISM AND THE DIALECTIC*, by Georg Lukács (London: Verso, 2000). For a critique of Zizek’s contention, see Peter Hudis, “Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness Reconsidered,” *NEWS & LETTERS* (June 2001), pp. 5, 10.
9. See “Writings on Women, 1902-14” in *THE ROSA LUXEMBURG READER*, pp. 233-47.
10. See Tariq Ali’s “Recolonizing Iraq,” *NEW LEFT REVIEW*, 21 May-June 2003. For the threats being made against Iraqi feminists by former supporters of Saddam Hussein’s regime as well as by Islamic fundamentalists, see “Support Yanar Mohammed,” *NEWS & LETTERS*, March 2004, p. 2.
11. *ROSA LUXEMBURG, WOMEN’S LIBERATION AND MARX’S PHILOSOPHY OF REVOLUTION*, by Raya Dunayevskaya (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 194.