

# Conference Report

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## **Rosa Luxemburg in China: A Report on the 'Rosa Luxemburg' Conference 21–2 November 2004 – South China Agricultural University, Guangzhou, China**

The widely articulated need for a convincing rebuttal to the notion that there is no alternative to capitalism is fueling renewed interest in the work of Rosa Luxemburg, who developed one of the most comprehensive analyses of capital's drive for self-expansion in the history of Marxism. Luxemburg's work remains especially compelling because she did not separate an analysis of what is now termed the globalisation of capital from opposition to reformist, bureaucratic and centralist tendencies which stifle mass spontaneity and creativity. In light of the tragic outcome of so many efforts at social transformation over the past hundred years, the way she combined an economic critique of capital with the political defence of democracy and self-expression seems especially timely. That an incipient revival of interest in Luxemburg is underway today is reflected in several recent developments, such as new discussions of her work by important radical theoreticians, the

republication of her *Accumulation of Capital* and the appearance of *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, the first one-volume collection of her economic and political writings in English, and a conference on *The Accumulation of Capital* that was held at the end of 2004 in Bergamo, Italy.

The renewal of interest in Luxemburg especially characterised an important international conference in China on her ideas as a whole. Sponsored by the International Rosa Luxemburg Society, the Institute for World Socialism in Beijing and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Berlin, the conference was held on 21–2 November 2004 at the South China Agricultural University in Guangzhou (formerly Canton). It included eighty participants from China, Japan, India, Russia, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, Norway and the US. While this was not the first time that a conference on Luxemburg had been held in China, it represented the most far-ranging and comprehensive discussion of her work in the history of the country.

The context in which the conference took place is important to keep in mind in discussing its content. China is in the midst of one of the most rapid industrial expansions in modern history. In 2004, its economy expanded by nine per cent, while industrial production grew by sixteen per cent. Over the past twenty-five years, per capita gross domestic product has grown by an average of eight per cent a year (in comparison, the strongest growth per capita in gross domestic product for any twenty-five-year period in the US, since 1830, averaged less than four per cent). This massive industrial boom is especially evident in the southern city of Guangzhou, which has served as a centre point of China's industrial expansion for the past two decades.

The rapid changes of the past quarter century have largely obliterated physical evidence of Guangzhou's long and storied history. Britain first tried to secure a foothold in China by using Guangzhou as a base for the opium trade in the eighteenth century, and it was from this city that the infamous opium wars of the 1840s were launched. Despite (or perhaps because of) such imperialist intrusion, Guangzhou had long been a centre of revolutionary activity and thought. It was from Guangzhou, that Hong Xiuquan launched the Tai'ping rebellion in the late 1840s, and Sun Yat Sen chose Guangzhou as the capital for the new Chinese Republic after the 1911 Revolution. Mao studied at the famous Peasant Movement Training Institute in Guangzhou in the 1920s, and Guangzhou's workers became known as among of the most militant and best organised in the world in the 1920s until the crushing of the ill-fated Canton Commune of 1927.

Today's Guangzhou, like most of southeast China and much of the country as a whole, is torn between rapid modernisation and industrialisation on the one hand, and rising income differentiation and worker and peasant discontent on the other. Hundreds of millions of peasants have been evicted from the land and form a gigantic migrant labour force, flooding into the cities in search of employment in sweatshops with low wages and largely unregulated working conditions. Such conditions are proving increasingly destabilising. According to official Chinese government statistics, 58,000 unauthorised strikes occurred in the country in 2004. In the last months of 2004, strikes involving as many as 12,000 workers at a time have occurred in Guangdong and the 'special economic zone' of Shenzhen, where labour shortages are becoming increasingly common. Though there is little co-ordination between these strikes, calls for higher wages, improved working conditions, and an end to rampant corruption and police abuse are commonly voiced around the country.

The grave problems associated with the 'complete separation between the workers and the conditions for the realisation of their labour' which Marx called 'the basis of the whole process' of capital formation<sup>1</sup> and which Luxemburg so vividly detailed in her *Accumulation of Capital*, is no secret to those living in China today. At the same time, the lack of political reform in a country where discourse and debate are monopolised by a single party, remain an ever-present reality. To give but one example, in November 2004, the Chinese Communist Party banned further discussions on the role of intellectuals when *Southern People's Weekly* devoted an issue to a discussion of fifty 'public intellectuals' who have made significant contributions in exposing the truth about social realities in China. In language reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, the *Liberation Daily* of 15 November 2004, condemned any further discussion of 'public intellectuals' (the phrase has appeared only recently in China) on the grounds that

History has proven that only when intellectuals walk together with the CCP, become a part of the working class, and are one with the masses can they fully manifest their own talents.<sup>2</sup>

The *Southern People's Weekly* was banned and copies of its issue on public intellectuals were confiscated.

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<sup>1</sup> See Marx 1977, pp. 874–5.

<sup>2</sup> *Liberation Daily*, <<http://www.chinamil.com.cn>>, 17 November 2004.

The phenomenon of rapid capital accumulation coinciding with restrictions on freedom of expression, makes Luxemburg's refusal to separate the economic critique of capital from the political defence of democracy all the more compelling. Though Luxemburg is by no means an unknown figure in China (an important Chinese-language edition of her major writings appeared in the early 1980s), official discussions of her work have tended to be highly critical or dismissive. This was not the case, however, at the Guangzhou conference. Every one of the nine papers delivered by the Chinese participants focused on Luxemburg's concept of the inseparability of socialism and democracy. Each was supportive of Luxemburg's overall approach, with the possible exception of the paper by Zhou Shang-wen of the Institute for Law and Political Science at the University of Hunan and Jiang Nai-bing of East China Normal University on 'The Evaluation of Luxemburg's Concept of Inner-Party Democracy'; their paper concluded that

Luxemburg valued mass spontaneity so highly that she went to the other extreme . . . she demonstrates the tendency of blindly worshipping spontaneity and ignoring the party's functions.

The predominant view on the part of the Chinese participants was that there is much to learn from Luxemburg's critique of Lenin's organisational centralism, her polemics with reformist elements within the German Social-Democratic Party, and her critique of Lenin and Trotsky in 1918 for installing a 'régime of terror' that negated democracy and freedom of expression.

In a paper entitled 'An Analysis of the Thoughts of Rosa Luxemburg on Socialist Democracy', Tang Ming of the Pedagogical University of Central China, and Yang Hengxi, of the Institute of Political Science at the Central China Normal University in Wuhan, discussed Luxemburg's critique of 'the wrongful notion of Lenin that confronted democracy with the dictatorship of the proletariat after the October Revolution'. They noted, 'the improper criticisms of her by Lenin and Stalin have hobbled studies on Luxemburg's discourse on socialist democracy'. Zhang Guang-ming, of Beijing University, noted in his paper 'Rosa Luxemburg and the Tradition of Autonomous Marxism' that Chinese Marxism has for too long 'stood in the shadow of the Russian model'; in this very original paper, he argued that Luxemburg's concept of socialism transcended the limits of political discourse that characterises both Western social democracy and Stalinism. He discussed Luxemburg as an expansive thinker who helped inaugurate the tradition of 'autonomist Marxism' that finds expression in Western Marxists such as Anton

Pannekoek and Chinese Marxists such as Chen Du Xiu, who led the CCP before being purged as a 'Trotskyist' following the abortive 1927 Revolution.

The sympathetic treatment of Luxemburg by the Chinese participants did not fall into a crude counterposing of Lenin and Luxemburg, as if they were absolute opposites on all issues (which sometimes has occurred in the West). Several of the Chinese participants acknowledged Luxemburg's respect for Lenin's contribution and noted that they held similar views on many issues. However, several speakers quoted directly from her 1918 critique of Lenin's role during the Russian Revolution:

Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, and becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element.<sup>3</sup>

With the possible exception of Zhang Guangming's contribution, most of the presentations by the Chinese participants did not turn up new insights or findings, but it was nevertheless striking to see how openly and intensely the Chinese participants discussed the importance of establishing an integral connection between socialism and democracy on the basis of Luxemburg's legacy.

This does not mean that the discussions by the Chinese participants covered everything that can be said regarding Luxemburg's concept of revolutionary democracy. Wang Xue-dong, of the Institute for Publication and Translation of the Central Committee of the CCP (who gave a paper entitled 'The Evaluation of Rosa Luxemburg's Concept of Inner-Party Democracy'), and Zhou Sui-ming of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (who gave a paper entitled 'The Analysis of Luxemburg's Concept of Democracy and its Precursors in the New Marxism of the West'), presented incisive explorations of Luxemburg's critique of organisational centralism, especially as found in her 1904 'Organisational Questions of Russian Social Democracy'. Luxemburg's critique of excessive organisational centralism, they noted, has important ramifications for efforts to avoid reproducing the capitalist division of labour in contemporary social movements. Recent research has shown how persistent was Luxemburg's critique of Lenin's organisational methods. For instance, in her 1911 'Credo', a particularly sharp critique of Lenin that has only recently been discovered and published in English, she stated:

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<sup>3</sup> Luxemburg 2004a, p. 307.

We felt obliged to stand up decisively against the organisational centralism of Lenin and his friends, because they wanted to secure a revolutionary direction for the proletarian movement by swaddling the party, in a purely mechanistic fashion, with an intellectual dictator from the central party Executive.<sup>4</sup>

Though it is not hard to see why Luxemburg's critique of organisational centralism, and her calls for inner-party democracy, would resonate with a Chinese audience, it also bears noting that Luxemburg's concept of socialist democracy did not end there. Luxemburg's concept of revolutionary democracy also challenged the very notion that the monopolisation of political power and intellectual discourse in the hands of a single party can lead to an effective creation of socialism. As she wrote in her 1918 critique of Lenin and Trotsky,

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.<sup>5</sup>

The important contributions by the Chinese scholars were matched by a number of probing discussions by participants from other countries. Subhoranjan Dasgupta, of the Institute for Development Studies at Calcutta University, challenged the notion, voiced all too often nowadays, that Luxemburg's critique of Lenin flowed from a failure of radical nerve when it came to taking appropriate measures in the face of 'the revolutionary Event'. He argued in his paper, 'The Dialectical Core of Luxemburg's Concept of Democracy', that Luxemburg was always uncompromising in her calls to overthrowing the bourgeois-capitalist system. She did, as Dasgupta stressed, like 'any misty-eyed liberal, accuse Lenin and Trotsky of applying force and violence'. Her critique of Lenin, he stressed, was motivated by the same concern as her critique of German Social Democracy: opposition to any tendency that counterpoises the form and content of social transformation. In his paper, which exhibited a very high level of intellectual quality and clarity, Dasgupta stated:

What mattered to the visionary is the redemptive spirit of the socialist system which demolishes the unbridgeable dichotomy between the form and content plaguing all expressions of bourgeois democracy. The content of class

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<sup>4</sup> Luxemburg 2004b, p. 271.

<sup>5</sup> Luxemburg 2004a, p. 305.

exploitation encased in the supposedly faultless form of parliamentary democracy cannot be the goal of socialist democracy whose form and content should hold the individual and the collective in one indivisible digit of harmonious liberation.

Similar themes were addressed in 'Rosa Luxemburg's Vision of Socialism and its Meaning for Marxism in the 21st Century', by Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, of the Institute of Development Studies in Calcutta. He emphasised Luxemburg's confidence in the self-activity and reason of the masses, as seen in her statement during World War I that

socialism is 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 humanity<sup>6</sup>

and her comment during the German Revolution of 1918 that 'the mass of proletarians learn the necessary idealism and soon acquire the intellectual leadership'.<sup>7</sup> This confidence in the ability of working people to become agents of their own liberation, Gupta argued, meant that, while Luxemburg

has not left for us any blueprint for the future socialist society, all the major ingredients of a socialist society based on the principles of revolutionary humanism and democracy, are present in a scattered manner in her writings.

He also discussed the similarities between Luxemburg's positions and those of Lukács and Trotsky. Indeed, it was noteworthy that Trotsky was mentioned in a positive light several times at the conference.

Gupta also argued that Luxemburg's and Gramsci's approaches were closely connected, since both had an understanding 'of the socialist revolution being an act of deep political, economic and moral transformation'. At the same time, Gupta stated, 'for [Luxemburg] socialism is not an ideal of absolute humanism; rather it is situated "in the point of view of the revolutionary proletariat"'. It should be noted that the two perspectives are in no way contradictory; Gramsci surely rooted socialism 'in the point of view of the revolutionary proletariat', yet he also wrote:

It has often been forgotten that in the case of a very common expression (historical materialism) one should put the accent on the first term –

<sup>6</sup> Luxemburg 2004c, p. 320.

<sup>7</sup> Luxemburg 2004d, p. 348.

'historical' – and not on the second which is of metaphysical origin. The philosophy of praxis is absolute 'historicism', the absolute humanism of history. It is along this line that one must trace the thread of the new conception of the world.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most interesting dimensions of the conference was the dialogue between Chinese participants and Luxemburg scholars from Germany and Japan, some of whom have spent decades exploring the significance of Luxemburg's contribution. The German Luxemburg scholar Ottokar Luban, who has written a pioneering study of the Spartacus Uprising of 1919,<sup>9</sup> delivered a paper on 'Rosa Luxemburg's Concept of Democracy', which discussed Luxemburg's repeated battles against the SPD's separation between socialism as an 'ultimate' goal and the means used to reach it – a separation that was present from the moment the SPD adopted the Erfurt Programme in 1891. Theodor Bergmann, who has written a number of books on the history of the German communist movement,<sup>10</sup> spoke on 'The Luxemburg Tradition in German Communism' focusing on the efforts of independent leftists such as August Thalheimer, leader of the Communist Opposition in Germany. Thalheimer had known Luxemburg personally (she recommended him as an editor of *Die Rote Fahne* in 1918) and he continued to defend Luxemburg's positions against the slanders of the Stalinists until the end of his life. Thalheimer and other German critical communists are not well known in China, and Bergmann's paper was an important effort to fill in a missing chapter of the history of the anti-Stalinist Left. He also related Luxemburg's legacy to contemporary concerns, writing of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) in today's Germany:

The PDS also joined the governments in two of the federal 'Länder', where they have a stronger position . . . [yet] it is impossible to oppose bourgeois policies, when you are part of the government. In spite of its different intentions, the PDS has proved that Rosa Luxemburg was right even in this respect.

Luban's and Bergmann's papers, and the discussion on them, raised a number of questions regarding Luxemburg's concept of revolutionary organisation.

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<sup>8</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 465.

<sup>9</sup> See especially Luban 2004.

<sup>10</sup> See Bergmann 2001.

As Luban noted, although Luxemburg was, in many respects, a product of German Social Democracy, she broke from aspects of its programmatic basis by 1918. As she stated in her speech to the Founding Congress of the German Communist Party in that year:

Until the collapse of August 4, 1914, German Social Democracy took its stand upon the Erfurt Program, by which the so-called immediate aims were placed in the forefront, while socialism was no more than a distant guiding star, the ultimate goal.<sup>11</sup>

She argued that this separation had proven to be the noose around the neck of the socialist movement:

August 4 did not come like thunder out of a clear sky; what happened on August 4 was the logical outcome of all that we had been doing day after day for many years.<sup>12</sup>

Rejecting much of the programmatic ground that had guided the SPD since 1891, she turned anew to Marx, proclaiming: 'It has become our historical duty today to replace our program upon the foundation laid by Marx and Engels in 1848'.<sup>13</sup> Luxemburg's effort to reorganise the movement on the basis of Marx's work of 1848 resonates with her earlier response to the 1905 Russian Revolution, when she developed her theory of the mass strike by returning to the ground that Marx left as theorist and organisational activist during the 1848 Revolutions.<sup>14</sup>

One question that this raises, at least in my mind, is that, despite Luxemburg's efforts to steer a new course in 1918–19, she never broke fundamentally from the tradition of German Social Democracy, as reflected by the fact that she never cited Marx's 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, even though it was first published in 1891 by Engels because of his dissatisfaction with the Erfurt Programme. Although Luxemburg may have recognised the need to break from the programmatic ground that defined the movement since 1891, in many respects, she remained within its theoretical and political parameters even in 1918–19. In particular, she never seems to have noticed that Marx's critique of the organisational unity of Lassalleans and 'Marxist' Eisenachers

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<sup>11</sup> Luxemburg 2004e, p. 359.

<sup>12</sup> Luxemburg 2004e, p. 362.

<sup>13</sup> Luxemburg 2004e, p. 360.

<sup>14</sup> For a clear expression of this, see Luxemburg 1907.

at Gotha in 1875 might provide the basis for a concept of organisation that was radically different from what had predominated in the socialist movement up to that point.

It seems to me that this blind spot about Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* speaks to an issue discussed at the conference – 'Luxemburg and Lenin versus Luxemburg or Lenin'. While there was much discussion of Luxemburg's criticism of Lenin's organisational centralism, few rejected Lenin's organisational concepts wholesale. Though the reasons for this varied, it makes sense to avoid posing the question as one of Luxemburg or Lenin. For all of her embrace of spontaneity, Luxemburg never rejected the need for the leading role of a vanguard party; and, for all of Lenin's vanguardism, he never fully rejected the importance of spontaneous mass activity. Though Luxemburg and Lenin may have been opposites when it came to many organisational issues, they were not necessarily *absolute* opposites. But, can the same be said of Lenin's organisational concepts vis-à-vis Marx, given the fact that Marx himself did not promote a concept of the leading role of a vanguard party? And did not Lenin likewise fail to acknowledge that Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* contained the ground for a distinctive concept of organisation, even though he built on Marx's *Critique* when it came to the issue of smashing the bourgeois state in his *State and Revolution*?<sup>15</sup> All of this raises the broader question of whether the tendency to skip over the organisational ramifications of Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* has left the radical movement bereft of an alternative concept of organisation that transcends the limits of post-Marx Marxism.

Thalheimer touched on this issue in a 1930 essay entitled (appropriately enough) 'Rosa Luxemburg or Lenin' – even if he did not draw the conclusions that we might today. He wrote,

Still in 1914–15 we did not exclude the possibility of being able to still raise the flag of revolution within the Social Democracy and cleansing it of opportunist elements. Only gradually did we become convinced that within this old framework there was nothing more to expect, nothing more to gain. One must be clear, however, that inside the Social-Democratic Party the severe factional struggles between the Lassalleans and Eisenachers were still fixed in the memory, the idea of a split met with the most difficult

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion on the impact on the history of Marxism of this lack of attentiveness on the part of Lenin and other post-Marx Marxists to the organisational ramifications of Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, see Dunayevskaya 1991 and Mészáros 1995.

obstructions and the most grave hesitations among even the most progressive workers.<sup>16</sup>

Thalheimer thereby acknowledged that even as late as 1914 – 39 years after Marx wrote the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* –, the dividing line between Lassallean and Marxian organisational concepts remained blurred within the German movement. The question that needs to be asked is whether the fundamental difference was recognised even *after* the split from the SPD. Thalheimer himself never seems to have realised the full ramifications of the divide between Marxian and Lassallean organisational concepts – no great surprise, given the fact he remained a rather rigid orthodox Marxist, failing to rise to the level of Luxemburg’s theoretical or political insightfulness. Yet did any Marxist, including those who were far more insightful, recognise the distinctiveness of Marx’s approach to organisational questions? The difference between Lassalle and Marx may well have been understood when it came to the difference between Lassalle’s efforts to establish a reformist accommodation with Bismarck as against Marx’s revolutionary approach. However, that hardly meant that Lassallean *organisational* concepts did not continue to permeate revolutionary Marxists as well. Stalinism is the most extreme, but hardly the only, expression of such a phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> The Marxists of Luxemburg’s generation did not seem to recognise that Marx’s refusal to separate the vision of a fully developed socialist society from the immediate tasks facing revolutionaries in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* provided grounds for a distinctively Marxian concept of organisation. Indeed, one can question whether the fundamental difference between Lassallean and Marxian concepts of organisation has been fully recognised even today.

It would be hard to discuss the work of Rosa Luxemburg in a place like China without reflecting on her writings on precapitalist and technologically underdeveloped societies. Few Marxists of her generation took as lively an interest in what is now called the Third World, and few have matched her detailed analyses of how capital is driven to consume non-capitalist environments in order to satisfy its insatiable hunger for self-expansion.

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<sup>16</sup> Thalheimer 1930, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> For a view of Lenin as a Lassallean, see Dunayevskaya 2000, pp. 179–80. For Luxemburg’s ambiguous relation to Lassalle, especially when it came to matters of organisation, see Luxemburg 1904, p. 417: ‘It was Lassalle who transformed into deed the *most important historical consequence* of the March revolution in finally liberating the German working class, fifteen years later, from the political *Heerbann* of the bourgeoisie and organising it into an independent political party’.

Professor Narihiko Ito, a noted Luxemburg scholar at the Central University of Japan, who is preparing a seventeen-volume Japanese edition of her collected works, spoke on an important dimension of Luxemburg's writings on precapitalist society – a 1907 manuscript on slavery in the ancient Greek and Roman world that he discovered in the 1990s and published in 2002 (an abridged English translation now appears in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, edited by Kevin B. Anderson and myself).<sup>18</sup> His paper 'On the Document "Slavery" in Antiquity from Luxemburg's Lectures at the Party School' discussed the context in which this remarkable document was written, and its connection to Luxemburg's effort to comprehend the dissolution of precapitalist communal forms – an issue that also greatly concerned Marx, especially in his writings of the 1870s and 1880s on Russia, India and Sumatra, and on Native Americans. Ito also called attention to Luxemburg's critique of Engels's *Anti-Dühring* in 'Slavery'. She wrote, 'Unlike Engels, we do not need to place exploitation after the emergence of private property. The mark [community] itself allows for exploitation and servitude'.<sup>19</sup> My own paper, entitled 'New Perspectives on Luxemburg's Writings on the Non-Western World', addressed related themes. It consisted of a comparison of newly translated, as well as recently discovered, writings by Luxemburg on precapitalist communal forms, with Marx's late writings on indigenous peoples and precapitalist societies. The paper also touched on the difference between Marx's multilinear philosophy of human development and the unilinear evolutionist perspective, which has defined much of orthodox Marxism. It concluded:

Luxemburg's firm opposition to imperialism, her appreciation of pre-capitalist communal forms, and her openness to forces of liberation – not just the proletariat but women as well – can inspire our generation to explore anew the *totality* of Marx's Marxism, of which she could have but the faintest intimation. Our generation is the first to have all of Marx's writings pried from the Archives – from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* to the *Grundrisse* to his writings on the 'Asiatic Mode of Production' to the original drafts of his three volumes of *Capital*, to the writings from his last decade on India, China, Russia, Indonesia, Native Americans, and others. When Luxemburg's passionate determination to achieve genuine human liberation is combined with a determination to absorb the totality of Marx's

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<sup>18</sup> [Editorial note: an unabridged version of this text will appear shortly in *Historical Materialism*.]

<sup>19</sup> Luxemburg 2004f, p. 112.

Marxism that our generation is the first to have access to, new doors can be opened to liberation.

It would also be hard to assess the significance of Luxemburg without discussing her contribution as one of the most important female theorists in the history of Marxism. Though it has often been assumed that Luxemburg was 'not interested' in women's issues, recent studies have disclosed that she took a far more active interest in women's emancipation than many have assumed. While Luxemburg's connection to women's issues did not receive a great deal of discussion at the conference, Tanja Storlokken, of Norway, gave a probing paper on 'Women in Dark Times: Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt'. Storlokken discussed Arendt's overlooked essay of 1966 in which she called Luxemburg an outstanding female theorist who forged an independent liberatory perspective. However, Storlokken took issue with Arendt's contention that 'Luxemburg was so little orthodox indeed that it might be doubted that she was a Marxist at all'.<sup>20</sup> Arendt based her judgment partly on Luxemburg's stated revulsion at the 'elaborate rococo ornaments' à la Hegel which adorn Marx's *Capital*.<sup>21</sup>

My own view on this matter is that, if an aversion to Hegel was sufficient to render one 'not a Marxist at all', the pantheon of Marxism would be much smaller indeed. Luxemburg, it seems to me, did have limitations when it came to philosophy; unlike Lukács, Lenin or Gramsci, she never undertook a serious study of Hegelian dialectics. Yet that hardly appears to be exceptional among the Marxists of her time. It was only later, with the publication of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 (in 1932), the *Grundrisse* (in 1939), Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (in 1923) and Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* of 1914–15 (in 1929–30), that it became much harder for serious Marxists to dismiss Marx's Hegelian heritage as mere a 'rococo ornament'.

In any case, Storlokken showed that Arendt's misdirected 'praise' of Luxemburg for 'transcending' Marxism was rooted in a failure on her part to comprehend the Marxist core of Luxemburg's theory of spontaneity and subjectivity. Arendt read Marx as a mechanical materialist who reduced humanity to *homo economicus*. She held that Marx conflated labour and work

<sup>20</sup> Arendt 1968, pp. 55–6.

<sup>21</sup> The statement is from a letter of Luxemburg to Hans Diefenbach of 8 March 1917: 'In theoretical work as in art, I value only the simple, the tranquil and the bold. That is why, for example, the famous first volume of Marx's *Capital*, with its profuse rococo ornamentation in the Hegelian style, now seems an abomination to me'. See Luxemburg 1978, p. 185.

by reducing purposeful activity to manipulation and material production. As I see it, Storlokken's paper suggests that Arendt mistook the object of Marx's critique for an affirmation of a presumed eternal human essence. Given Arendt's failure to grasp the anti-mechanistic and liberatory basis of Marx's critique of value-creating labour, it is no accident that she wrongly concluded that so non-mechanistic a thinker as Luxemburg could not be truly considered a Marxist.

Other papers at the conference included one by Alexander Vatlin, of Moscow State University, on Luxemburg's differences with Nikolai Bukharin; by Gerd Kaiser (a German author of a number of works on the European workers movement) on Luxemburg's criticism of national self-determination in light of the subsequent history of Marxism, and by Evelin Wittich, of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, on contemporary studies and interest in Luxemburg in Germany. There are plans to publish the papers from the conference in book form in English and German.

The conference has also stimulated some discussion among its participants regarding where Luxemburg scholarship can go from here. Three issues especially come to mind in this respect. The first concerns the relation between feminism and social revolution. The widely-held notion that Luxemburg was not interested in women's issues, since she refrained from direct participation in the German women's movement, needs to be re-thought in light of the modest number, but still important, writings by her that have come to light regarding struggles for women's emancipation. Luxemburg was surely critical of the bourgeois women's movement of her time. Did this reflect an ingrained hostility towards feminism on her part, or did it instead reflect opposition to bourgeois domination over mass struggles? Was there an unspoken feminist dimension in Luxemburg that remains to be fully explored? This is an important issue in light of debates over whether or not a Marxian theoretical perspective centered on workers' struggles necessarily leads to a downgrading or even denigration of feminist concerns. A second issue that calls for further scholarship concerns Luxemburg's attitude toward non-Western societies. Luxemburg's fervent opposition to calls for national self-determination has led many to assume that she suffered from a Eurocentric disregard for those not directly involved in class struggles against capital. This view becomes hard to support, however, in light of her intense studies of noncapitalist societies and the high regard with which she often viewed precapitalist communal forms. The full

range of her writings on the non-Western world is still in need of a comprehensive analysis, especially in terms of the tension they exhibit between her dismissal of calls for national self-determination and her insistent opposition to all forms of imperialist intervention into what we now call the Third World. Thirdly, and most importantly in my view, is the need to explore Luxemburg's writings on socialist democracy in light of the central problematic of our age – working out a philosophically grounded response to the question of 'what happens *after* a social revolution'. The failure of innumerable revolutions over the past century to surmount the capital relation compels radical theoreticians to rethink the very nature of a postcapitalist society. While Luxemburg did not write extensively on the economic or political content of postcapitalism, her concept of socialist democracy contains crucial grounds for rediscovering and rethinking the Marxian notion of what must be done to transcend alienation. The future of the socialist project may well depend on it.

This was certainly a major reason for the interest in Luxemburg at the conference in Guangzhou. Few countries are experiencing in a more direct manner the impact of the globalisation of capital and few can appreciate more profoundly Luxemburg's emphasis on the inseparability of socialism and democracy. Whatever one thinks about the current political situation in China, one thing is clear: unlike Russia or Eastern Europe, Marxism is not considered a 'dead dog' in China. Many Chinese intellectuals are interested in exploring diverse strands of Marxism, including Western Marxism, and this is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Given the hunger for ideas now prevailing in the most populous nation on earth, Luxemburg would no doubt be pleased to know her ideas are helping to enliven discussions of liberation in 'the East'.

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