“The Hammer Blow of the Revolution”

written by Michael Löwy | July 22, 2016

Rosa Luxemburg’s defense of socialist democracy and her critique of the Bolsheviks in her pamphlet *The Russian Revolution* (1918) are well known. Less well known and often forgotten is her critique of bourgeois democracy, its limits, its contradictions, and its narrow and partial character. We propose to examine this critical line of thought in some of her political writings without any pretentions to completeness.

We begin this discussion with *Reform or Revolution* (1898), one of the foundational texts of modern revolutionary socialism, where this problem is taken up in a particularly intense way. This brilliant essay, the work of a young woman almost unknown at the time, is a unique synthesis of revolutionary passion and discursive rationality, filled with sparks of irony and lightning flashes of intuition. It remains, more than a century later, surprisingly contemporary.

But it is not without its defects, notably in its economic polemic with Eduard Bernstein, where she develops a sort of optimistic fatalism: the belief in the inevitability of the economic collapse (*Zusammenbruch*) of capitalism. It should be said in passing that this is an opinion that one finds even today among a number of Marxists who have announced that the current financial crisis of capitalism is “the last” and that it will bring about the definitive end of the system. It seems that Walter Benjamin, who knew the Great Crisis of 1929 and its results, formulated the most pertinent conclusion regarding this subject: “The experience of our generation: capitalism will not die a natural death.”

Nevertheless, in her discussion of democracy, Luxemburg dissociates herself from the facile optimism of the religion of democratic Progress (with a capital “P”)—the illusion of increasing democratization of the “civilized” societies—dominant in her era among both liberals and socialists. This is also one of the strong points of her argument. Furthermore, in her analysis of the liberal bourgeoisie, one finds not a trace of economism: One sees here, in all of its force, what Georg Lukács, in “The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg,” the opening essay of *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), designated as the revolutionary principle in the terrain of method: the dialectical category of the totality. Luxemburg discusses the issue of democracy from the perspective of the historical totality in motion, where economy, society, class struggle, state, politics, and ideology are inseparable moments of a concrete process.

Dialectic of the Bourgeois State

Luxemburg’s eminently dialectical approach to the bourgeois state and its democratic forms permits her to avoid both the social-liberal approach (Bernstein!) that denies its bourgeois character, as well as that of a certain vulgar Marxism that does not take into account the importance of democracy. Faithful to the Marxist theory of the capitalist state, Luxemburg insists on its character as a “class state.” But she immediately replies, “This, too, like everything referring to capitalist society, should not be understood in a rigorous absolute manner, but dialectically.” What does that mean? First, it means that the state “without a doubt assumes functions of general interest in terms of social development,” but at the same time it only does so “to the degree that the general interest in terms of social development coincides with the interest of the dominant class.” The state’s universality is thus severely limited and in a large degree negated by its class character.

Another aspect of this dialectic is the contradiction between the democratic form and the class content: “The formally democratic forms are not democratic with regard to their content where class interests dominate.” But she does not limit herself to that finding, which is a classic locus of Marxism; not only does she not disregard the democratic form, but she shows that it can come into conflict with the bourgeois content: “This manifests itself in a tangible fashion in the fact that as soon as democracy shows the tendency to negate its class character and become transformed into an instrument of the real interests of the population, the democratic forms are sacrificed by the bourgeoisie and by its state representatives.” The history of the twentieth century is riddled with examples of this sort of “sacrifice,” from the Civil War in Spain to the coup d’état in Chile; these are not exceptions, but the rule. Already in 1898 Luxemburg foresaw with impressive acuity what would happen throughout the next century.

Luxemburg opposes to the idyllic vision of history as uninterrupted “Progress,” as the necessary evolution of humanity toward democracy, and above all to the myth of an intrinsic link between capitalism and democracy, a sober analysis, without any illusions, of the diversity of political regimes:

The uninterrupted victory of democracy, which to revisionism as well as to bourgeois liberalism appears as a great fundamental law of human history and especially modern history, is shown upon closer examination to be a phantom. No absolute and general relation can be constructed between capitalist development and democracy. The political form of a given country is always the result of the composite of all the existing political factors, domestic as well as foreign. It admits within its limits all variations of scale from absolute monarchy to the democratic republic.

What she could not foresee, of course, were authoritarian state forms even worse than monarchies: the fascist regimes and military dictatorships that would develop in the capitalist countries—in the center as well as in the periphery—throughout the twentieth century. But she has the merit of being one of the few in the workers’ and socialist movements to challenge the ideology of Progress, which was common among bourgeois liberals and among a good part of the left, and demonstrate the complete compatibility of capitalism with radically anti-democratic political forms.

Bernstein, a convinced advocate of the ideology of Progress, believed in an irreversible evolution of modern societies toward more democracy and—why not? —toward socialism. Now, observes Rosa Luxemburg, “the state, that is to say the political organization, and the property relations, that is to say the legal organization of capitalism, become more and more capitalist, and not more and more socialist.” We see again the opposition between the left and the right in German Social Democracy corresponding to the antagonism between faith in ineluctable Progress of the “civilized” countries and the insistence on social revolution.

Not only is there no particular affinity between the bourgeoisie and democracy, but often there is a struggle. Yet it is in the struggle against this class that democratic advances take place: “In Belgium the conquest of universal suffrage by the labor movement was due to the weakness of the local militarism, and consequently to the special geographic and political situation and, above all, this ‘piece of democracy’ was obtained, not *by* the bourgeoisie, but *against* it.”

Is this just the case of Belgium, or is it rather a general historical tendency? Luxemburg seems to opt for the second hypothesis, considering that the only guarantee of democracy is the force of the workers’ movement.

The way out of this circle is simple: In view of that fact that bourgeois liberalism has given up the ghost from fear of the growing labor movement and its final aim, we conclude that the socialist labor movement is today the only support for democracy. We must conclude that the socialist movement is

not bound to bourgeois democracy but that, on the contrary, the fate of democracy is bound up with the socialist movement. Democracy does not acquire greater chances of survival to the extent that the socialist movement renounces the struggle for its emancipation; on the contrary, democracy acquires greater chances of survival as the socialist movement becomes sufficiently strong to struggle against the reactionary consequences of world politics and the bourgeois desertion of democracy. He who would strengthen democracy must also want to strengthen and not weaken the socialist movement. He who renounces the struggle for socialism renounces both the labor movement and democracy.

In other words, democracy, in the eyes of Rosa Luxemburg, is an essential value that the socialist movement must save from its reactionary adversaries, among which one finds the bourgeoisie always ready to betray its democratic proclamations if its interests so demand. We have already seen several examples of this simple fact. What does the reference to the "reactionary consequences of world politics" mean? It is without a doubt a reference to the imperialist and colonial wars that are sure to reduce or eliminate the democratic progress of countries in conflict. We will return to this issue.

The surprising assertion that democracy is linked to the workers' and socialist movement has also been confirmed by the history of the following decades: the defeat of the socialist left because of its divisions, its mistakes, and its weakness—in Italy, in Germany, in Austria, in Spain—leading to the triumph of fascism, with the backing of the principal forces of the bourgeoisie and the abolition of all forms of democracy during many long years (in Spain for decades).

The relationship between the workers' movement and democracy is eminently dialectical: Democracy needs the social movement and vice versa—the proletarian struggle needs democracy in order to develop.

If democracy has become superfluous or annoying to the bourgeoisie, it is on the contrary necessary and indispensable to the working class. It is necessary to the working class because it creates the political forms (autonomous administration, electoral rights, and so on) which will serve the proletariat as fulcrums in its task of transforming bourgeois society. Democracy is indispensable to the working class because only through the exercise of its democratic rights, in the struggle for democracy, can the proletariat become aware of its class interests and its historic task.

Rosa Luxemburg's formulation is complex. In a first moment, she seems to say that it is thanks to democracy that the working class can struggle to transform society. Would this mean that in the non-democratic countries such a struggle is not possible? On the contrary, insists the Polish revolutionary, it is *in the struggle* for democracy that class-consciousness develops. She is thinking, no doubt, about a country like czarist Russia—which included Poland—where democracy did not yet exist, and where revolutionary consciousness was awakening precisely in the fight for democracy. This is what one will see a few years later, during the Russian Revolution of 1905. But she may also be thinking, and probably is, about Wilhelmine Germany, where the fight for democracy was far from being won but found in the socialist movement its principal historic subject. In any case, far from neglecting the "democratic forms," which she distinguishes from their bourgeois exploitation and manipulation, she strictly associates their fate with that of the workers' movement.

What then are the important democratic forms? In 1898, she mentions three above all: universal suffrage, the democratic republic, and self-administration; later—for example on the subject of the Russian Revolution of 1918—she will add the democratic freedoms: freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and the right to organize. What about parliament? Luxemburg doesn't deny democratic representation as such, but she is wary of parliamentarism in its current form: She considers it "a specific instrument of the bourgeois class state, a way to make capitalist contradictions mature and

develop." She will return to this debate a few years later in polemical articles against Jean Jaurès and the French socialists whom she accuses of wanting to arrive at socialism by way of "the peaceful swamp of senile parliamentarism." The degradation of this institution is revealed in its submission to the executive power: "The idea, rational in itself, that the government shouldn't cease being the instrument of the majority of popular representation, is turned into its contrary by the practice of bourgeois parliamentarism: namely the servile dependence of popular representation on the survival of the present government." She gives credit, in this context, to the French revolutionary socialists who have understood that the legislative action of parliament—useful for extracting some laws favorable to the workers—cannot substitute for the organization of the proletariat for the conquest of political power by revolutionary means.

One finds analogous arguments in an essay of 1904 titled "Social Democracy and Parliamentarism." With the mordant irony that makes her polemics so electrifying, she takes up the issue of "parliamentary cretinism," that is, the illusion according to which parliament is the central axis of social life and the motive force of world history. The reality is completely otherwise: The enormous forces of world history, in point of fact, act outside of the bourgeois legislative chambers. Far from being the absolute product of democratic Progress, parliamentarism is a historically determined form of the class rule of the bourgeoisie. At the same time, in a dialectical movement—Luxemburg cites Hegel—with the rise of the socialist movement, parliament must become "one of the most powerful and indispensable instruments of the class struggle" of the workers, serving as a tribune of the popular masses and a locus of agitation for the socialist revolution. But one cannot then effectively defend democracy, and the parliament itself, against reactionary maneuvers except by the *extra-parliamentary* action of the proletariat. The direct action of the proletarian masses "in the streets"—for example, in the form of a general strike—is the best defense in the face of threats against universal suffrage. In short, the challenge for socialists is to convince "the working masses to count more and more on their own forces and on their autonomous action and not to consider parliamentary struggles as the central axis of political life." We will return to this.

The Contradictions of the Democratic Bourgeoisie: Militarism, Colonialism

The "really existing bourgeois democracies" are characterized by two profoundly anti-democratic dimensions that are closely linked: militarism and colonialism. In the first case, it is the question of an institution: the army, hierarchical, authoritarian, and reactionary, which constitutes a sort of absolutist state within the democratic state. In the second, it is a question of the imposition, by force of arms, of a dictatorship over the colonized peoples by the Western empires. As Luxemburg recalls in *Reform or Revolution?*, its class character always obliges the bourgeois state, even a democratic bourgeois state, to accentuate its coercive activity in the domains that serve the interests of the bourgeoisie, "namely militarism and customs and colonial policy." The denunciation of this "coercive activity," militarist and imperialist, will be one of the principal axes of Luxemburg's critique of the bourgeois state.

From the capitalist point of view,

Militarism has become indispensable. First, as a means of struggle for the defense of "national" interests in competition against other "national" groups. Second, as a means of investment of financial and industrial capital. Third, as an instrument of class domination over the laboring population inside the country. In themselves, these interests have nothing in common with the development of the capitalist mode of production.

What demonstrates best the specific character of present-day militarism is the fact that it develops generally in all countries as an effect, so to speak, of its own internal, mechanical motive power, a phenomenon that was completely unknown several decades ago. We recognize this in the fatal

character of the impending explosion, which is inevitable in spite of the complete indecisiveness of the objectives and motives of the conflict. From a motor of capitalist development militarism has changed into a capitalist malady.

Luxemburg predicted, in 1898, a world war sparked by competition between national capitalist powers and the uncontrollable dynamics of militarism. This is one of those dazzling intuitions found throughout *Reform or Revolution?* even if she could not, of course, predict "the circumstances" of the conflict.

Militarism within and colonial expansion without are closely linked and lead to a decline, a degradation, a degeneration of bourgeois democracy:

As a result of the development of the world economy and the aggravation and generalization of competition on the world market, militarism and the policy of big navies have become, as instruments of world politics, a decisive factor in the interior as well as in the exterior life of the great states. If it is true that world politics and militarism represent a rising tendency in the present phase of capitalism, then bourgeois democracy must logically move in a descending line. In Germany the era of great armaments began in 1893, and the policy of world politics, inaugurated with the seizure of Tsingtao [Quingdao], were paid for immediately with the following sacrificial victim: the decomposition of liberalism, the shift of the Centre Party from opposition to government. The recent elections to the Reichstag of 1907, fought under the sign of German colonial policy, were, at the same time, the historical burial of German liberalism.

In the course of the twentieth century, one will see other such sacrifices of democracy demanded by militarism—in Europe (Spain, Greece) as well as in Latin America—much more serious and dramatic than the examples cited here. Nevertheless, Luxemburg's analysis is broader: She describes the growing weight of the army in the political life of the bourgeois democracies, not only in imperialist competition, but also as an internal factor within bourgeois societies counterpoised to the rising workers' struggles. In an anti-militarist article of 1914, she shows two underlying tendencies that reinforce the political preponderance of military institutions in the bourgeois state:

These two tendencies are, on the one side, imperialism, which leads to a massive increase in the size of the army, the cult of savage military violence, and a dominating and arbitrary militarism with regard to legislation; on the other side, the workers' movement that is also undergoing a massive development, emphasizing class antagonisms, and bringing about military intervention more and more frequently by the army against the proletariat in struggle.

This "savage military violence" is exercised within the framework of imperialist politics, above all against colonial peoples who are subjected to a brutal oppression that has nothing "democratic" about it. Bourgeois democracy produces in its colonial policy autocratic and dictatorial forms of domination. The question of colonialism is touched upon but not very developed in *Reform or Revolution?* But later, in a 1902 article about Martinique, Luxemburg will denounce the French colonial massacres in Madagascar, the American war of conquest in the Philippines, and England's in Africa, and finally the aggression against China committed by the French, English, Russians, Germans, Italians, and Americans working together.

Luxemburg will return to the crimes of colonialism, in particular in *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913). Picking up the thread of her relentless critique of colonial politics, she turns to the chapter on primitive accumulation in Volume I of *Capital*, however observing that it is not a question of an "initial" moment, but of a permanent tendency of capital: "Here it is not a question of primitive accumulation, the process continues to our own time. Each colonial expansion is accompanied by an obstinate war against indigenous economic and social conditions, as well as the violent plundering of

their means of production and their labor force." Accumulation leads to the permanent military occupation of the colonies and the brutal repression of their uprising, of which the classic examples are found in English colonialism in India and French colonialism in Algeria. In fact, this permanent primitive accumulation continues today in the twenty-first century, with methods different—but no less ferocious—than those of classical colonialism.

Rosa Luxemburg also mentions in *The Accumulation of Capital* the case of what could be called internal colonialism in the largest modern bourgeois democracy, the United States: In the course of the conquest of the West, with the help of the railroads, the Native Americans were driven out or exterminated with firearms, with whiskey, and with syphilis and the survivors enclosed in "reservations" like savage beasts—another tragic example of the contradictions of bourgeois democracy.

Democracy and the Conquest of Power: The Hammer Blow of Revolution

Let's return to *Reform or Revolution?* now to examine the issue of the relationship between democracy and the conquest of power. Bernstein and his "revisionist" friends believed in the possibility of changing society through gradual reforms within the framework of bourgeois democratic institutions, notably parliament, where Social Democracy might one day become the majority. For reasons that we have already mentioned above, Rosa Luxemburg could only reject this strategy:

There was no doubt for Marx and Engels about the necessity of having the proletariat conquer political power. It is left to Bernstein to consider the chicken coop of bourgeois parliamentarism as the organ by means of which we are to realize the most formidable social transformation of history—the passage from capitalist society to socialism.

This revolutionary conquest of power will be democratic not because it will be realized within the framework of bourgeois democratic institutions, but because it will be the collective action of the great majority of the population: "This the difference between the Blanquist style coups d'état carried out 'by a militant minority,' initiated without concern for the moment and, in fact, always at the wrong time, and the conquest of political power by the great conscious mass of the people."

Continuing her polemic, she derides Bernstein's reformist approach and puts forward a powerful argument to justify the need for revolutionary action.

Fourier's scheme of changing, by means of a system of phalansteries, the water of all the seas into tasty lemonade was surely a fantastic idea. But Bernstein, proposing to change the sea of capitalist bitterness into a sea of socialist sweetness, by progressively pouring into it bottles of social reformist lemonade, presents an idea that is merely more insipid but no less fantastic.

The production relations of capitalist society approach more and more the production relations of socialist society. But, on the other hand, its political and juridical relations establish between capitalist society and socialist society a steadily rising wall. This wall is not overthrown, but is on the contrary strengthened and consolidated by the development of social reforms and the course of democracy. Only the hammer blow of revolution, that is, the conquest of political power by the proletariat, can break down this wall.

The image of the "hammer blow" makes one think immediately of Marx's statement in his writings on the Paris Commune (1871) about the necessity, for proletarian revolution, of "smashing" the capitalist state apparatus. The idea is essentially identical, even if Luxemburg doesn't cite the writings of Marx. This "hammer blow" is even more indispensable if one considers the role of the

growing militarism and of the army in the political system. What does this consist of concretely? By what means can this conquest of power be carried out? What revolutionary strategy or tactic does Luxemburg propose? This is a not a theme developed in *Reform or Revolution?* but here and there she suggests that the "classic" revolutionary methods—insurrection, barricades—are not excluded. Not only the revisionists, but also the leadership of the German Social Democratic Party referred insistently to the Preface written by Friedrich Engels in 1895 at the time of the new edition of Marx's work *The Class Struggles in France* (1850); in this text the old leader seems to consider that these methods of struggle have been rendered obsolete by progress in the military arts—canons and modern rifles—giving a strategic advantage to the army.

In fact, Engels' original wording was much less categorical, the published version being considerably "watered down" by the party leadership (of which Luxemburg was ignorant). Engels was outraged by this manipulation; in a letter to Karl Kautsky on April 1, 1895, he wrote, "To my amazement, I see today in *Vorwärts* an extract from my introduction, reproduced without my knowledge, and arranged in such a way that I appear to be a peaceful worshipper of legality at any price. Also, I would like the introduction to appear in *Neue Zeit* without any cuts, so that this shameful impression is cleared up." Friedrich Engels died a few months later; the complete text never appeared in *Neue Zeit*, nor, of course, in the re-edition of Marx's book. It would have to wait for the Russian Revolution of 1917, after which it was finally published in the 1920s. Here is the response of Luxemburg to the "legalistic" argument:

When Engels in the Preface to *The Class Struggles in France* revised the tactics of the modern workers' movement, opposing to the barricades the legal struggle, he did not have in mind—as every line of that preface demonstrates—the problem of the definitive conquest of political power, but rather that of the current everyday struggle. He doesn't analyze the attitude of the proletariat with regard to the capitalist state at the moment of the seizure of power, but its attitude within the framework of the capitalist state. In a word, Engels gives instructions to the *oppressed* proletariat, and not to the victorious proletariat.

In fact, her interpretation is disputable. It is not a question, with Engels, of the role of barricades in the "current everyday struggle"! What is interesting in this passage is the attitude of the author of *Reform or Revolution?* with regard to the question of "armed," "insurrectional," and "illegal" methods of struggle—traditional methods from the revolutions of 1789 to 1871—which she refused to exclude from the political arsenal of the proletariat. She was not wrong to do so, since all of the great revolutionary fights of the twentieth century, victorious or defeated—the two Russian revolutions (1905, 1917), the Mexican Revolution (1910-1919), the German Revolution (1918-1919), the Spanish Revolution (1936-1937), and the Cuban Revolution (1959-1961), to cite only some examples—made use of these "illegal" and "extra-parliamentary" methods.

But the revolutionary method that she favored, as we know, is the mass strike, the "natural and spontaneous form of all great revolutionary action of the proletariat." In fact, this is a method that abounds in a very great variety of initiatives of struggle: economic and political strikes, demonstration or fighting strikes, mass strikes and partial strikes, fights at the barricades, "a sea of phenomena, eternally new and ceaselessly moving and changing." Of course the mass strike "does not replace or render superfluous direct and brutal confrontations in the street." The experience of Russia in 1905 shows that "combat at the barricades and the head-on confrontation with the forces of the state constitutes the highpoint in the contemporary revolution, a phase in the process of struggle of the proletarian mass." The confrontation is not eliminated but located at the "climax" of the struggle, which obviously gives it an important role.

Luxemburg will return to Engels' Preface in the watered-down version of the German Social Democratic Party, the only one known in her period—which definitely annoyed her—in her speech to

the founding convention of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD – Spartakusbund) in December 1918. This time around it was not a question of pretending, as in 1898, that it referred to the "current everyday struggle": "With all the knowledge that specialists in the domain of military science have at their disposal, Engels demonstrates here … that it is completely vain to believe that working people can take their revolution to the streets and come out victorious." He was wrong, and this document served, she observes, to reduce the party's activity exclusively to the parliamentary realm. Without excluding the "revolutionary use of the National Assembly" as a tribune, she sees the seizure of power by workers' and soldiers' councils, as in Russia in October 1917, as the road to follow.

Rosa Luxemburg speaking at a Spartacus League rally

Rosa Luxemburg gives no recipes; she is betting on the creativity of the revolutionary movement. She limits herself to this simple observation: "Democracy is indispensable, not because it makes the conquest of political power by the proletariat unnecessary, on the contrary, it makes it both necessary and possible to take power." But this conquest of power comes by way of an institutional rupture, a radical subversion, capable of breaking the legal and political wall of the capitalist state; it comes by the "hammer of the revolution."

Socialist Democracy and
Bourgeois Democracy (1918)

We are not going to discuss here the question of democracy in a socialist society, which goes beyond the scope of this essay. What interests us here is what Luxemburg writes in her little book on the Russian Revolution, on the subject of bourgeois democracy. It is important to emphasize that the manuscript of 1918 fraternally criticizing the Bolsheviks' errors in the area of democracy in no way

suggests that Luxemburg subscribed to bourgeois democracy. It says explicitly that the historic task of the proletariat is "to create in place of bourgeois democracy, socialist democracy." Let's look at her argument in her polemic with Trotsky:

"As Marxists," writes Trotsky, "we have never been idol worshippers of formal democracy." Surely, we have never been idol worshippers of socialism or Marxism either. Does it follow from this that we may throw socialism on the scrap-heap, a la Cunow, Lensch, and Parvus [a faction in the Social Democratic Party], if it becomes uncomfortable for us? Trotsky and Lenin are the living refutation of this answer.

"We have never been idol worshippers of formal democracy." All that that really means is: We have always distinguished the social kernel from the political form of bourgeois democracy; we have always revealed the hard kernel of social inequality and lack of freedom hidden under the sweet shell of formal equality and freedom—not in order to reject the latter but to spur the working class into not being satisfied with the shell, but rather, by conquering political power, to create a socialist democracy to replace bourgeois democracy—not to eliminate democracy altogether.

Rosa Luxemburg returns here to the "classic" distinction, already formulated in *Reform or Revolution?*, between the democratic form, equality, and formal freedom and the bourgeois content, inequality, and the killing of freedom. But this time she affirms the solution clearly: neither bourgeois democracy nor the dictatorship of a revolutionary elite, but a socialist democracy with a new social content.

Rosa Luxemburg had foreseen in 1914 "the intervention of the army in struggle against the proletariat." As we know, in January 1919, Rosa Luxemburg herself, Leo Jogisches, Karl Liebknecht, and other Spartakists would be assassinated, victims of this "military savage violence" that she had denounced and which had taken place within the framework of a respectable, constitutional (bourgeois) democracy. What Luxemburg had not foreseen, even in her worst nightmares, was that this political assassination by the counter-revolutionary military officers would take place under the aegis of a government led by the SPD, the German Social Democratic Party.

Translated by Dan La Botz

Footnotes