

Rosa Luxemburg and the Necessity of Anti-Imperialism for Revolutionary Socialism

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Rosa Luxemburg speaking at a Spartacus League rally



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Today prominent political leaders are calling themselves socialists, but even if the terms “socialist” and “democratic socialism” are being used, it is often unclear what exactly is meant by these terms and what kind of political projects they embody. In this essay I will turn to the work and life of Rosa Luxemburg to outline what internationalism and anti-imperialism have to do with socialism and how her critique of bourgeois political economy can deepen our understanding of socialism. I will conclude alongside Luxemburg that any socialism eliding questions of imperialism is not revolutionary and actually opens the door for reactionary and fascistic forces to gain power.¹

Imperialism, Capitalism, and Militarism

For Luxemburg—and we should add Marx and Engels—revolutionary socialism, by its very nature, *must* be connected to an internationalist struggle against capitalism and imperialism. What made possible the development of industrialization and modern capitalist nation-states was the expropriation of wealth, land, resources, and labor that began with fifteenth-century colonization. Moreover, it is these ongoing practices of dispossession, extermination, exploitation, and imperialism that to this day allow our so-called national economies to run. Because imperialism and capitalism are organically related, one cannot be a legitimate socialist in the eyes of Luxemburg if one supports imperialist ventures—including supporting militarism and war to further national capital accumulation.

Luxemburg was uniquely attuned to these issues both because she had an “outsider” perspective on the German empire as a Jewish Polish woman, and also because she watched the SPD (Democratic Socialist Party of Germany) deviate from its initial anti-imperialist stances and finally vote for war credits supporting World War I. The rightward swing of the SPD can be tracked in part by its assimilation in the German state. Anti-socialist laws in Germany pushed socialist organizing underground from 1878 to 1890. August Bebel, who was staunchly against German imperialism, would work to bring together the Social-Democratic Workers Party of Germany with other socialist groups to found the SPD in 1890, when the anti-socialist laws were finally repealed. But now that socialists were able to engage publicly in German electoral politics, what this involvement meant and what it would look like was a new and serious question. In the end, the electoral strategy of the

SPD would force it to reverse its position on German imperialism and militarism to avoid opening itself to more state repression or alienating itself from the German working-class voter who would support a war. We can't forget that the military is largely seen as a "job provider"; in the United States today the military is our largest employer.

While Luxemburg was a member of the SPD, she frequently disagreed with party leaders' conceptions of socialism and their tactics to build it in Germany. If imperialism has played, and continues to play, a crucial role in capital accumulation and assuaging the crises of capitalism, then it must be kept front and center within socialist politics. Germany at the turn of the twentieth century was becoming a colonial power, even if it was late to the game compared to other European countries. There was a specific crisis in Morocco that spurred Luxemburg to clash with SPD leaders on imperialism as a central issue. The so-called 1911 Agadir crisis occurred when French troops occupied Morocco. In response, Germany sent a gunboat to protect the country's trade interests, which then triggered Britain to back France as they worried about further German encroachment. The event was a scramble over colonial and imperial control of Morocco, and Germany was pressed by its own financial crisis to make sure it was not going to lose out. Eventually France and Germany negotiated a redistribution of their colonies, with France taking all of Morocco.

Luxemburg wanted to have a conference with the International Socialist Bureau to assess the specific situation, but the SPD refused to hold such a conference. Luxemburg wrote a scathing report of their reactionary attitudes in her pamphlet *Concerning Morocco*.² There she named the SPD's hypocrisy: While it was willing to support anti-colonial Moroccan uprisings, even supporting protests in *other* countries around the issue, the SPD was too worried about the coming elections to make any public statement about German militarism and imperialism. In particular, she criticized SPD support of the Sultan of Morocco, who was just a puppet of imperialist demands: "Bernstein [a major leader of the SPD] only noticed in the [act to condemn French invasion of Morocco] the equal right of all trading nations in Morocco, and he quite strangely overlooked the fact that, besides European traders, there is still another factor, which also has, as it were, 'certain rights': the native people, the tribes of Morocco, who are now rebelling."³ The party executive in Berlin wrote in response to Luxemburg, "If we were to commit ourselves firmly too soon and to stress the Moroccan Question at the expense of all questions of *domestic policy* in such a way that an effective electoral slogan could be used against us, then the consequences cannot be anticipated."⁴ Luxemburg responds,

We have heard so much about the "splendid situation" in which we are approaching the Reichstag elections, and at the same time we have been warned repeatedly against spoiling this "situation" by some imprudent action; previously this was the struggle for universal suffrage in Prussia, and now it is the agitation against the hubbub surrounding Morocco. ... The best way of throwing away the advantage of this "situation" would be to begin to consider all party life and all tasks of the class struggle simply from the perspective of the ballot-box.⁵

Taking a strong position against German imperialism could have helped educate the public on these issues and demonstrate the resolve of a *revolutionary* anti-imperialist socialist party. But the SPD was already caught up in focusing on what would make them more likely to achieve electoral wins. The fact many Germans would support imperial military efforts for reasons of "job security" was not lost on the SPD. Analogously today, our politicians rarely condemn imperialist military actions on the campaign trail and tend to prioritize a "national job" perspective rather than an internationalist economic perspective.

Party leaders in the SPD avoided talking about issues of imperialism, saying that they were "foreign" affairs while the party needed to stay focused on "domestic" issues. However, Luxemburg points out the myopia of this position, writing,

The duty of Social Democracy is not to reassure public opinion, but to do the very reverse, to rouse it and warn it against the dangers lying dormant. ... *We can only count on the resistance of the enlightened masses.* ... They say that we should restrict our agitation exclusively to matters of domestic policy, to questions of taxation and social legislation. *But financial policy ... and the stagnation of social reform are organically bound up with militarism, naval policy, colonial policy, and with personal rule and its foreign policy. Any artificial separation of these spheres can only present an incomplete and one-sided picture of the state of our public affairs.*⁶

Here we see Luxemburg highlighting the necessity of “enlightened” mass support, meaning that the masses must be politically educated for self-determination, as it is they who should be the motor of party decisions. A major part of the progressive value of an organized socialist party is that it operates as an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist educational organ. She shows that the ultimate success of the party lies in “the resistance of the masses,” and *not* in attempting to co-opt bourgeois electoral power, because she is clear on the *organic unity* of financial policy, colonial policies, militarism, and capitalism. The idea that socialism can be “voted in” without radically altering the ways in which we think about social and economic justice, or our ways of living and reproducing our social conditions—which both then and now rely on the exploitation of much of the world—is not only incorrect but works to further obfuscate the real issues.

Anti-Imperialism and Luxemburg’s Critique of Bourgeois Political Economy

In her *Introduction to Political Economy*, written for the SPD political education school, Luxemburg aimed to make political economy comprehensible for the average person—cutting through the jargon and exposing the mystifications of economics by the academics and politicians of her time. For her, a basic understanding of political economy can and should be had by everyone. This is important for the very reason that we all contribute to and are controlled by economic forces—including our need to find some type of work and source of income. Luxemburg homed in on the lie of politicians and academics who talked about the “national economy” as if modern countries had closed and self-perpetuating economies that were not closely bound to the workings of many other places. What she writes about Germany in 1909 is probably even more true today. Nearly all the products we buy and use are made or resourced in places other than the country where we live: “To make our life and work possible ... we have almost all other countries, peoples, and parts of the world working for us, and we work in turn for all these countries.”⁷

While exchange of goods is probably as old as humanity, the exchange of goods globally—on the scale it exists today—is clearly a much more recent phenomenon. The first thing Luxemburg will point out is that these new relations of dependency between countries are highly *asymmetrical*. They were forged by colonial dynamics of conquest, empire building, and economic expansion resulting in extreme disparities of capital accumulation in colonial metropolises at the expense of their colonies. At the time of Luxemburg’s writing, Great Britain received from its largest colony, India, 1,000 million marks, and in exports another 1,200 million marks-worth of goods. Luxemburg writes, “The ‘surplus’ is nothing more than the economic expression of the colonial exploitation of India by British capitalism.”⁸ While the British tried to hide behind the idea of “aid” and “loans” for “alleviating poverty” and “improving infrastructure,” Luxemburg is quick to point out the hypocrisy of offering so-called aid that is primarily used to make India’s exploitation easier for Britain rather than to better the lives of Indians. Given the structure of colonial capitalist relations, there can be no such thing as “humanitarian” aid if the country being granted this aid is in its dire situation because of active underdevelopment, and labor and resource exploitation, by the very country offering “aid.” These goods or finances “are not sent for exchange, but for the production of profit.”⁹ What we find primarily exchanged is not even concrete “goods” but rather *capital*, which doesn’t serve to “fill

‘certain gaps’ in other countries’ ‘national economies,’ but quite the reverse—opening up gaps, rifts, and splits and acting like gunpowder to transform these ‘national economies’ sooner or later into heaps of rubble.”¹⁰ Loans from colonial metropolises doubly exploit currently or formerly colonized territories by monopolizing trade and collecting interest on debt repayments—and the irony is that the funds used as loans are manifestations of capital first accumulated by the expropriation of the very countries that they are being given to at a higher cost.¹¹

For a contemporary example of this imperialist capitalist hypocrisy, we can turn to the history of France, the United States, and the political-economic conditions in Haiti. As W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James have aptly argued, the Haitian revolution not only sought to end colonial rule and slavery in Haiti, but it also set off a chain of events leading ultimately to the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The Haitian revolution was a landmark moment in the attempt to concretely develop our modern ideals of freedom and democracy, promised but not achieved in the previous English, French, and American revolutions. While I won’t go into all the details of why the Haitian revolution wasn’t able to maintain all that it had promised, we cannot overlook the fact that its greatest obstacle to achieving democratic freedom lies in the economic exploitation by neocolonial powers through debts.

The revolution ended in 1804, but by 1825 France sent warships to surround Haiti, demanding “reverse slave reparations” for all the revenue French slave owners had lost post-revolution; this amounted to 150 million francs. On threat of military invasion and another war, Haiti was forced to agree to these “reparations,” and the United States stepped in to make sure Haiti paid back these “debts” or the new republic would not be allowed sovereignty or international respect by Europe. With the military threat of destruction by Anglo-European, capitalist, former slave countries, Haiti, after 122 years, would finish paying back its “debt” to French slaveholders in 1947. However, as probably many of us have experienced with student loans, Haiti, would pay back much more than 150 million francs in interest and debt-servicing fees. France and the City Bank of New York, or as we now know it, Citibank (who eventually bought Haiti’s debt from France), would collect the equivalent of \$21 billion from Haiti just for dismantling its slave economy.¹² Regardless of what liberal philanthropists say about their “charity,” whatever resources colonial nations offer to former colonies are only given to enable further exploitation.

We could extend this analysis to the role of the Clinton Foundation in Haiti, which collected over \$13.3 billion dollars after the 2010 earthquake only to have minuscule amounts (.06 percent) go to local organizations. The main project of the foundation has been the construction of a \$300 million garment factory in 2012 called Caracol Industrial Park, which was a subsidized deal with the U.S. and Haitian governments.¹³ More than 1,000 Haitians lost their land for the building of this factory, which would produce clothing for Old Navy, Walmart, and Target.¹⁴ The Clintons claimed they would create 100,000 jobs, but only 8,000 ever materialized. And these jobs are extremely low waged at \$5 a day—far below the amount needed to basically survive in Haiti, which requires at least \$10-20 per day.¹⁵

Conclusion: Luxemburg, Democratic Socialism, and Fascism

Luxemburg’s method of analyzing international economic relations, cutting through the misinformation of liberal and conservative politicians and economists, is still very relevant for understanding the developments of our time. Her holistic understanding of organization, struggle, and radical self-determination through revolutionary political education and democratic institutions enabled her to challenge the imperialistic tendencies of her contemporaries. Taken to its most radical conclusions, her work points toward a globally oriented democratic society organized from below against capitalist imperialism. Luxemburg would eventually break with the SPD and form an organization that tried to better connect with these principles—first as the Spartacus League and

eventually the Communist Party of Germany. Luxemburg's murder would be organized by the very forces she was fighting within the SPD around issues of imperialism and anti-Semitism. We would not be wrong to draw connections to the ways that socialism was being constructed and popularized at that time and its later transition to National Socialism.

The German revolution that brought to a head all the contradictions of Luxemburg's work, life, and death resulted in the Weimar Republic, which attempted to integrate socialist demands within a bourgeois, liberal, capitalist framework. But even the most progressive aspects of the Weimar Republic would only last 14 years before a fascist coup. While I will not try to reduce the very complex historical phenomena that lead to the mainstreaming of fascism in Germany, I will say that the way we frame and argue for socialist demands is incredibly important to the way they will get taken up by those in power. Either we construct socialist politics as fundamentally internationalist and anti-imperialist or we narrowly focus on "domestic issues" and the immediate interests of certain U.S. citizens and the interests of our nation at the expense of others. I hope that we follow in the footsteps of Luxemburg by taking always an internationalist position against imperialism and that we are not confused by the words of those who only want to preserve and augment U.S. hegemony in the name of the U.S. working class. I close with the words of Luxemburg:

One cannot gauge phenomena such as modern imperialism with "law" and "morality." ... The inseparable connection of imperialism with capitalist development ... is what we must teach the working class to understand. And consequently, the working class must draw the conclusion that imperialism, war, plundering countries, haggling over peoples, breaking the law, and the policy of violence can only be fought against by fighting capitalism, by setting social revolution against global genocide. Looking *within* imperialist policy for remedies and solutions to its conflicts, wanting to oppose its *Strum* and *Drang* by trying to scale things back to past conditions, is not proletarian but petty-bourgeois policy, a hopeless policy that boils down to a constant defense of the imperialism of yesterday against the imperialism of today.¹⁶

notes

1. The focus of this essay is how the positive contributions of Luxemburg's theorizing of socialism can be useful for us today. There are other aspects of her work, like her abstract analysis of national liberation struggles, that are much less helpful, and many others have dealt with these shortcomings. For example, see Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1982); and Eric Blanc, "The Rosa Luxemburg Myth: A Critique of Luxemburg's Politics in Poland (1893-1919)," *Historical Materialism* (Vol. 25, Issue 4, 2018), 1-34.
2. Published in *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, July 24, 1911.
3. Rosa Luxemburg, "Petty-Bourgeois or Proletarian World Policy?" (August 19, 1911) in Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido, trans., *Discovering Imperialism: Social Democracy to World War I* (Haymarket Books, 2011), 469.
4. Rosa Luxemburg, "Concerning Morocco," Marxist Internet Archive (2004), www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1911/07/24.htm.
5. Luxemburg, "Concerning Morocco."
6. Luxemburg, "Concerning Morocco." (emphasis mine)
7. Rosa Luxemburg, "Introduction to Political Economy," in Peter Hudis, ed., *Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg Volume 1: Economic Writings 1* (Verso, 2013), 99.
8. Luxemburg, "Introduction to Political Economy," 112.
9. Luxemburg, "Introduction to Political Economy," 114.
10. Luxemburg, "Introduction to Political Economy," 115-6.
11. "Public loans for railroad building and armaments accompany all stages of the accumulation of capital: the introduction of commodity economy, industrialization of countries, capitalist

revolutionizing of agriculture, as well as the emancipation of young capitalist states. For the accumulation of capital, the loan has various functions: (a) it serves to convert the money of non-capitalist groups into capital, i.e. money both as a commodity equivalent (lower middle-class savings) and as fund of consumption for the hangers-on of the capitalist class; (b) it serves to transform money capital into productive capital by means of state enterprise—railroad building and military supplies; (c) it serves to divert accumulated capital from the old capitalist countries to young ones.” Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, Agnes Schwarzschild, trans. (London: Routledge, 2003), 400-401.

12. www.theroot.com/as-haiti-burns-never-forget-white-people-did-that-1827454590.
13. www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37826098.
14. www.actionaidusa.org/work/land-grabbing-in-haiti-the-caracol-industrial-park/.
15. www.actionaidusa.org/work/land-grabbing-in-haiti-the-caracol-industrial-park/.
16. Luxemburg, “Petty-Bourgeois or Proletarian World Policy?” 470.