

# Rosa Luxemburg's Legacy for Feminism

July 6, 2019



Many people who know something about Rosa Luxemburg would be surprised to hear the name of this talk: They know Luxemburg as the author of the brilliant pamphlets *The Mass Strike* and *Reform or Revolution*; they know that she debated with famous leaders of the Social Democrats and with Lenin(!); maybe they know her theoretical work *The Accumulation of Capital*, with its powerful claim that capitalist accumulation both depends on noncapitalist relations (so “primitive accumulation,” as Marx called it, is ongoing) but at the same time needs to destroy them. This point incidentally has been elaborated by David Harvey under the name “accumulation by dispossession.” But what did Luxemburg write about women? How can she have a legacy for feminism? At a conference sponsored by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation some years ago, I was on a panel with a similar title, and one speaker said she didn’t think Luxemburg was a feminist.

Certainly Rosa Luxemburg is a model for feminists of all times in her passionate commitment both to understanding the nature of our oppressive system and, most important, to changing it. Certainly her life was an inspiration for feminists in that she pursued her political and her personal life without concern for what women were and were not supposed to do. Rejecting bourgeois standards of sexual morality she had passionate love affairs. Her letters, by the way, are a great source of information about her personality and personal life as well as her political thinking.

But what exactly did she contribute *theoretically* and politically to an understanding of *women’s position* in capitalism—that is, to the question of how sexism and capitalism are related and how we can combat them both. Some might think she was not a feminist because they equate her view on sexism and capitalism with her view on national liberation. Although she was Polish (and a Jew), she was quite uninterested in struggles for national liberation for Poland. She thought genuine national liberation was impossible under capitalism, and hence her focus was on building the working-class movement against capitalism. National liberation would take care of itself after the revolution. Some Marxists take this position regarding sexism. However, I do not think this was Luxemburg’s position.

If not, then what would she have to say about theoretical debates among socialist feminists today? Was she even a feminist in this sense? And on the practical political questions facing feminists today,

does Luxemburg's work give us any guidance? These are the questions I address here.

Luxemburg wrote next to nothing about women and was not active in the women's movement. This does not prove she wasn't a feminist, nor even that she was not interested in women's issues. Think of all the things that are not central to our work but that we care about deeply. Obviously women's issues were not her primary area of interest, but why should they have to be? We can have a division of labor. I believe that Luxemburg does have a legacy for feminism, and when we think about what it is, there is no reason to focus only on writings directly related to women and gender. Her absolute commitment to socialism-from-below, expressed in her debates both with Social Democrat leaders and with Lenin, and in her pamphlets, particularly *The Mass Strike*, where she stressed the importance of working people's self-activity for the development of experience and capacities, saying "The most precious, because lasting, thing in this rapid ebb and flow of the wave [of struggles] is its mental sediment: the intellectual and cultural growth of the proletariat"—these positions were what drew me to her in the first place, and there is NO political area of work to which this is not fundamental. This then is a crucial part of her legacy for feminism.

But turning back to women's and gender issues, it was Clara Zetkin, Luxemburg's close comrade and friend, who was better known for her work with working-class women, including forming groups that were similar to the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s and that made Lenin distinctly uneasy. August Bebel, who wrote *Women and Socialism* and other works on women, thoroughly believed in women's equality and was supportive of Luxemburg. He and other male leaders of the Social Democratic Party urged Luxemburg to get more involved with the question of women's emancipation (and who knows what she would have contributed if she had?), but she resisted. She and Clara saw this as an attempt to get Luxemburg off their backs since she was to their left. Though the two friends worked in different areas, they were closely aligned in Social Democratic Party politics, and I know of no evidence that Luxemburg disagreed with Zetkin's work with women. On the contrary, in some of her last letters of November 1918, she asks Zetkin for an article on women for their Spartacist newspaper, saying the issue "is so important now, and none of us here understand anything about it." And then she asked her to edit a women's section of the Spartacus paper, saying "It is such an urgent matter! Every day lost is a sin."

Based on this correspondence and on her short writings on women's issues, it should be abundantly clear that Luxemburg was a Marxist or socialist feminist as we use the terms today. (In *The Socialist Feminist Project*, which I edited in 2002 and which explains that I see socialist feminism not as an artifact of the 1970s but as an ongoing project with a history. Hence I included a section called "Foremothers and Fathers.") First I will say very briefly how I characterize a socialist feminist, some of whom are Marxists and some are not, and then try to say where Luxemburg would stand on the debates among us.

All socialist feminists see class as central to women's lives, yet at the same time none would reduce sex or race oppression to economic exploitation. And all of us see these aspects of our lives as inseparably and systematically related; in other words class is always gendered and raced and vice versa. The term "intersectionality" has come to be used for this position. Luxemburg certainly held to this perspective, as she recognized some kinds of oppression as common to all women and others varying by class and by nation.

It was the special needs of working women that were Luxemburg's priority, but she also supported positions some might see as merely bourgeois demands, such as women's suffrage and the end to all laws that discriminated against women. In this she agreed with August Bebel, who said, "Working-class women have more in common with bourgeois women or aristocratic women than do working-class men with men of other classes." Luxemburg advocated these universal legal rights both as a matter of principle and for pragmatic political reasons. Bringing women into politics would help

combat what she called “the suffocating air of the philistine family” that affected even socialist men, a provocative statement even today. Legal equality in her view was a necessary condition for women’s emancipation, but true emancipation would require the end of capitalism and women’s economic independence from men. She said, “In the view of many vulgar men and the bourgeois civil law, whoever owns bread rules the house. ... The history of the family pattern is indeed the history of women’s enslavement.” Thus women need equal pay, equal work, and social support for family. Luxemburg also supported suffrage on the pragmatic political grounds that it would build the ranks of the social-democratic forces. These positions were actually in advance of the bourgeois women’s organizations of the time. On one occasion, she critiqued social democrats willing to compromise on women’s suffrage to make an electoral alliance with liberals. The most radical of socialists were oftentimes also the best feminists.

Coming back to theoretical debates among feminists today, within the broad definition of intersectionality there are differences regarding how we should understand these kinds of oppression and how they are related. *Some* socialist feminists see capitalism and sexism (usually called “patriarchy”) as two distinct, though intersecting, *systems* with equal explanatory importance. (Other systems to account for racial and ethnic oppression are usually part of the picture, but I will ignore that here.) Just as capitalism is constituted by relations of oppression and exploitation between capitalists and workers, patriarchy is a system in which men oppress women. Some also say men *exploit* women, which they explain in different ways. This is known as a dual-systems position. *On the other hand, other Marxist-socialist feminists* believe there is only one kind of oppression and exploitation that, in the current period, really constitutes *a system with full explanatory powers*, and that is capitalism. However, other distinct kinds of oppression, like sexism (or racism), play more or less important roles *within the framework of that system* at different times and places.

One system or two—or more—is a highly abstract theoretical question. But it is often connected to a practical political one: What kind of political organizing should take priority? Should it always be class issues, labor struggles, and other economic issues not differentiated along gender lines? Or is it legitimate from a socialist point of view to give equal importance to distinctly women’s issues? Dual-systems theorists will invariably give equal political importance to organizing around class and sex (or race) issues. Why would they not?

On the other hand, what political implications should be drawn from the one-system theoretical position, which I accept? In my opinion—and I want to stress this—it does not follow that struggles around sex (or race) oppression should necessarily have a lower political priority. Socialist feminists try to integrate the two, whatever their views on the abstract question of one or two systems. For example, contemporary socialist feminists support the legal right to abortion, like liberal feminists, but they combine that with the right to birth control, medical care, childcare, better and equal pay (certainly more than \$15 an hour)—all the things necessary to give working-class women a genuine choice over their reproduction. They use the terms reproductive rights, or reproductive freedom or reproductive justice, preferred by black feminists. Luxemburg, I am pretty sure, assumed the one-system position, giving theoretical primacy to capitalism as a framework in which other kinds of oppression operate. On the practical political question, I would like to think she would have the flexible position regarding political priorities that I describe.

In her 1912 “Women’s Suffrage and Class Struggle,” which I’ve included in the “Foremothers” part of my book, Luxemburg makes an important theoretical argument relevant to current debates. She writes the following:

Only that work is productive which produces surplus value and yields capitalist profit—as long as the rule of capital and the wage system still exists. From this standpoint the dancer in a café, who makes a profit for her employer with her legs, is a productive working woman, while all the toil of the

woman and mothers of the proletariat within the four walls of the home is considered unproductive work. This sounds crude and crazy, but it is an accurate expression of the crudeness and craziness of today's capitalist economic order.

I have used this quote more than once to clarify the meaning of "(un)productive" in capitalism and also to distinguish oppression from capitalist exploitation. Some feminists are very offended by the Marxist position that housework is unproductive labor, and some argue for "wages for housework." But as the quote from Luxemburg makes clear, designating housework as unproductive is hardly an insult, nor is it sexist. A carpenter who works for the government is equally unproductive in capitalist terms, though both, obviously—and very importantly—are productive in a general sense. It's crucial to understand what "productive" means in capitalist terms, vis-a-vis the production of surplus value, because it is *this* that makes the capitalist system tick. There is more to be said about what's called the domestic labor debate, which is how to understand nonwaged work in capitalism. However, one important point is that even in 1912, Luxemburg wrote, "millions of proletarian women ... produce capitalist profit just like men—in factories, workshops, agriculture, homework industries, offices, and stores. They are productive therefore in the strictest economic sense of society today." And today women are the majority of the proletariat in the developing world. So there is no need to equate "women's work" with nonwaged work in the home as some do. Luxemburg used this fact of women's labor-force participation as an argument for suffrage; it showed that patriarchal conceptions of women's proper role had simply become ridiculous.

I agree with Luxemburg on this theoretical point and on its importance. However, I think we must be careful not to overstate its political importance. Even if housework were productive of surplus value it wouldn't follow that organizing housewives should be a priority for socialists. Compare guards in private prisons who produce surplus value. Though exploited by capital, they certainly would not be promising candidates for socialist organizing. On the other hand, while public sector workers are *not* productive in this sense, they are a key sector for labor organizing today, as they should be, given the attacks on the public sector. Where socialists should put their best energies depends on many factors, and we need to be alert to changing conditions.

Though not a valid criticism of Marx, the stress by feminists on the importance of nonwaged labor done largely by women is undeniably valid; indeed that is the labor that makes all other labor possible. Marxist-socialist feminists, particularly those espousing what has come to be called social reproduction feminism, have attempted to develop a complete story of labor in capitalism, some waged, some not. Their conception is of a single system of species reproduction, always involving a division of labor, but one that takes different forms related to changes in the capitalist economy. Neither the relations of production nor of reproduction are given by nature but are the result of gender and class struggles. Feminists in the United States have made demands to support caregiving as a public good, as it is in many countries with stronger social-democratic traditions. Even there, however, neoliberalism, a response to the ongoing crises of capitalism, has led to cutbacks in every field of social reproduction. Thus socialist feminists should make these crucial demands, but they should be recognized as transitional demands in the sense that they are not all winnable securely under capitalism, but rather point us toward a different society. A society that gave equal value to nonwaged caring labor would be socialism, not capitalism.

In a socialist mode of production dedicated to the satisfaction of need, not profit, the constraints of this "crude and crazy" economic system of capitalism would not apply. On the contrary: What drives the two systems is different, so what counts as productive and unproductive would be different. Instead of "productive" being defined in terms of what produces profit, it would be defined in terms of what produces well-being. Hence all the nonwaged caring labor that is done "for free," out of love, that is necessary in all societies, would be recognized as the essential productive labor that it is. And consider the scientific and creative work that is not done because it is not profitable but would

enhance our lives in manifold ways—unproductive in capitalist terms but productive in socialism. On the other hand, much of the labor that is “productive” in capitalism would be rightly recognized as unproductive, for instance making weapons and endless plastic junk.

Luxemburg’s stress on the meaning of “productive” labor in this crazy capitalist system also helps to explain why capitalism is leading to the destruction of our planet and why we need to build a society based on production for human needs, not profit. On the eve of World War I, Luxemburg famously said the choice is clear: it’s socialism or barbarism. Today this has a whole new existential meaning: It’s ecosocialism or death, in the words of Kali Akuno of Cooperation Jackson. For capitalism is—for better and for worse—an economic growth machine. The world economy now produces in less than two weeks the equivalent of the entire physical output of the year 1900, and global economic output now doubles every twenty-five to thirty years. China’s transition to a global capitalist economic power and its lack of democratic controls threaten ecological apocalypse. The basic problem lies in the conflict between the individualist rationality enforced by the competitive market system and what is rational from a social point of view. Each firm is compelled to act to maximize its own individual interests, and it goes on and on, though the results are catastrophic. One would think that self-destruction would be a refutation of this individualist model of rational economic behavior, but it is too deeply rooted in capitalist ideology for mainstream economists to give it up. Organizing around this issue has to be central to everyone today.

Lastly, with regard to political organization, what can Luxemburg tell us? Certainly she had a lifelong commitment to socialist organization, much as she stressed that spontaneity from below was critical. However, she also argued for a working women’s organization independent of the bourgeois women’s movement, so working women could better fight for their specific needs, while at the same time supporting universal women’s interests—an intersectional approach. More controversially on the left, she also supported women’s independent self-organization *within the working class and even among socialists*, encouraging Zetkin to found a women’s section of the Spartacus League. This position, I would point out, is ahead of many on the left today.

So in conclusion, there is a great deal that Luxemburg’s life and work can offer to contemporary socialist feminists.

## CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE



**Clara Zetkin**, *German Marxist theorist, socialist activist, women's rights advocate, anti-fascist, and friend of Rosa Luxemburg*

“When the men are silent, it is our duty to raise our voices in behalf of our ideals.”

“The capitalists speculate on the two following factors: the female worker must be paid as poorly as possible and the competition of female labor must be employed to lower the wages of male workers as much as possible.”

“For reforms ameliorate the situation of the working class, they lighten the weight of the chains labor is burdened with by capitalism, but they are not sufficient to crush capitalism and to emancipate the workers from their tyranny.”

“The workers have nothing to gain from this war, but they stand to lose everything that is dear to them.”

“The proletariat will be able to attain its liberation only if it fights together without the difference of nationality and profession. In the same way, it can attain its liberation only if it stands together without the distinction of sex.”