

Notes on the Party, Reform, Revolution and the Myth of Spontaneity in Rosa Luxemburg

July 16, 2018



This presentation was given at the June 30, 2018, DSA Lower Manhattan Branch meeting/picnic.

When I was in college and the Vietnam War was raging, I was president of the campus's SDS chapter. I remember lunching with the head of our local Young Democrats. He was a decent enough liberal who also opposed the war but told me he could never be a radical because he didn't believe in class struggle. I told him it was less a matter of what he and I believed than in what leading sections of the ruling class thought and did.

Jump ahead to today and the Supreme Court has just put the final nail in the coffin of any tolerance for labor unions no matter how servile or housebroken with its decision in the *Janus* Case. Add to that the Trump administration's war on public education, its brutality toward refugee asylum seekers and the high likelihood of another financial bubble explosion—all of which means the still largely one-sided class war is gathering strength.

It's also a good time at least for we precious few socialists to revisit the martyred revolutionary Polish-German Marxist Rosa Luxemburg. In the ten minutes I have, consider this the Tweet version of her importance to American radicals.

Rosa Luxemburg is thought of, her publisher's blurb rightly insists, "as one of the most creative writers of modern socialism and the foremost female theoretician of European radicalism." Her collected works in German total 14 volumes, three-quarters of which have yet to be translated into English, though efforts to do so at Verso Books are ongoing.

Luxemburg has an odd place in the history of the left. Libertarian Marxists see her as the appetizing alternative to dour, dictatorial Lenin. Communists of the Stalin variety saw her as an enemy of the vanguard party. Centrist Social Democrats either thought of her as a dangerous demagogue or at best an irritant. Even revolutionaries who adored Luxemburg used to either joke or not about DSA—this is a story I got from DSA co-founder Bogdan Denitch—that they couldn't or wouldn't join DSA because "you people killed Rosa Luxemburg."

That was a reference to the German right-wing Social Democrats' likely collusion with the proto-fascist Freikorps in the murder of Luxemburg in January 1919 at the age of 47, just days after her Spartakusbund, a radical faction of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), quit the SPD and changed its name to the German Communist Party (KPD).

Lenin, her supposed antipode and *bête noir*, had deep respect, calling her “an eagle.”

I believe the left, historically, whether friend or foe, exaggerates their differences, ignoring the context in which they worked and giving each one’s ideas a transhistoric importance—Luxemburg as the inveterate democrat and Lenin the scheming organization man. They had differences, sure—who wouldn’t—but those are caricatures either of them would and did reject.

As I say, much of the differences between Luxemburg and Lenin are exaggerated, due more to conditions prevalent in their respective countries. Lenin was forced by circumstances to lead an illegal, underground and tightly ideological party tailored to a despotic, backward, absolutist feudal state with no real right-wing socialist current to contend with.

Luxemburg for her part pushed for a radical politics in a legal, mass, multi-tendency party run by full-time bureaucrats and conservatized labor leaders in a largely democratic, highly industrialized western nation.

There was no huge gulf between Luxemburg and Lenin, I believe, but comradely differences based on history and place. Sadly, too many Leninists insisted that Luxemburg gave short shrift to organization, with her allegedly believing instead in spontaneity by masses of workers. In fact she did believe in organization. Her writings on Poland and the need for a disciplined party even rivaled Lenin’s, given repressive conditions in Poland.

Just a side note on the sin of spontaneity: As a veteran socialist once told me about what the notion really connotes, “spontaneity means somebody else did the organizing.” Much truth there.

What Luxemburg could not do was build a united radical opposition to the revisionist, drearily reform-only-minded trend in the SPD. Unlike Lenin, she spent much of World War One in prison. Released after the armistice, she was murdered just months later, her last days no career path for building a democratic, mass party.

For those of us who think reform and revolution are concepts tied at the hip, Luxemburg is likely the most important Marxist to speak about politics as practiced in Western democratic societies, and that includes even Antonio Gramsci. I won’t bury Lenin, but I do think we as western radicals have more to learn from Red Rosa than from Vladimir, particularly in her invocation of workers’ councils (just as Lenin did) and in the value of mass strikes, themselves educational opportunities that go way beyond what DSAers today do in trainings, as valuable as trainings are.

So what does she say about reform and revolution, today’s topic. The key essay is her *Social Reform or Revolution*, a response to Eduard Bernstein, a lukewarm leading comrade who argued that capitalism itself was moving inexorably toward increased socialization and that all that socialists needed to do was win government power through elections and pass enabling legislation. As Bernstein wrote in his *Evolutionary Socialism*, “The final goal, no matter what it is, is nothing; the movement is everything.”

That distinction was anathema to Luxemburg, who disparaged his view as no less than raising “the question of the petty bourgeois or proletarian character of the labor movement.”

In a lot of ways Bernstein’s epigram encapsulates traditional western liberalism; that is, the idea that capitalism per se is not the problem but that disparities in great wealth are, and that a democratic society would offer remediation and justice to the poor. Electing left-liberals and safeguarding unions alone would tamp down injustices, while capital’s own development through credit, cartels and advanced forms of communication would stabilize capitalism, socialize it of necessity and in itself create a desirable social peace.

I can't in the time remaining recreate how Luxemburg demolishes that rubbish, except to say that she isolates each of these phenomena as critical factors leading to crisis, not stability. Rather than a gradual introduction of socialism, the logic of capitalism would lead to collapse, or, as she put it, exacerbate class struggle that would mean "bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism."

Has anything changed? In her time, as she wrote "trade union action is reduced of necessity to the simple defense of already existing gains," while "the so-called social reforms are enacted in the interest of capital."

Think this week's horrific *Janus* Supreme Court decision, or the last time federal legislation favored workers, which was the the Occupational Health and Safety Act under Richard Nixon.

Note that she does *not* disparage reforms as such, provided that the struggle for them comes with

"a firm and conscious effort for the conquest of political power [which] impregnates the trade union struggle and the work for social reforms. But if this effort is separated from the movement itself and social reforms are made an end in themselves, then such activity does not lead to the final goal of socialism but moves in a completely opposite direction."

Then she adds perceptively that "as soon as 'immediate results' become the principle aim of our activity,' the clear-cut, irreconcilable point of view, which has meaning only insofar as it proposes to win power, will be found more and more inconvenient."

What was key to Luxemburg politically was working class political action, though giving it a more expansive definition than electioneering. Her defense of reforms was not based on reforming capitalism for its own sake but in giving masses of working people victories that would encourage them to fight for more.

For her, "what parliamentarism expresses...is capitalist society, that is to say a society in which capitalist interests predominate."

That was not in contradiction to her 1906 essay on the mass strike, which urged the party to shift its tactical emphasis to action and away from an overindulgence on purely organizational and educational issues. She believed that direct experience in political struggles was more salient and enduring than lessons learned through speeches and publications.

Let me end on this note: would that the level of class struggle in the US today allowed for an emphasis on mass strikes and workplace militancy. For the left, she urged, as one writer put it, "promoting mass actions and—in the process of the struggle itself—giving them leadership and organization."

Then we wouldn't just be celebrating the victory of an isolated handful of insurgents, such as DSA's Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, but a mass movement making history.