Paul Levi: A Luxemburgist Alternative?

written by Peter Drucker | July 2, 2012

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE RISE of Occupy have given fresh urgency to the question: is there an alternative to capitalism? And if so, what? For almost a century now the failure of the Russian Revolution has provided capitalism's defenders with a boogeyman, an argument that any attempt to get rid of the existing system will lead to something even worse. Among the adversaries of capitalism, some have argued that a revolution could have been achieved differently and better in the spirit of Rosa Luxemburg, who wrote a critique of the Bolsheviks' undemocratic policies as early as 1918. Paul Levi, Luxemburg's lawyer, briefly her lover, her follower, and from 1919 to 1921 her successor at the head of German Communism, was the first to defend a Luxemburgist alternative to Bolshevism.

Many things make Luxemburg a more appealing figure than Lenin. Both were gifted writers. But while Lenin spent much of his life as an exile, where he could follow politics only from a distance, Luxemburg played from 1898 until her death in 1919 a prominent role on the left wing of the German socialist movement, the biggest in Europe. Her fiery speeches repeatedly landed her in jail for insulting the monarchy or undermining the army. Without seeing herself as a feminist, she was greatly admired (and hated) as a female leader. Without being a principled pacifist, she attracted considerable sympathy with her deeply felt aversion to war and violence. She was a convinced democrat, who wrote, "The Spartacus League will never take over governmental power except in response to the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian mass of Germany." (31) And while Lenin died as the head of the Soviet Russian government, Luxemburg became a martyr in 1919 when she was brutally murdered by counterrevolutionary forerunners of the Nazis.

Leading German Communist Ruth Fischer would later describe Luxemburg's influence as a "syphilis bacillus," and in 1931 Stalin virtually read her out of the revolutionary pantheon. But when the German Marxist left first split off from social democracy at the end of 1918 to establish the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), few in its ranks thought they were choosing Lenin over Luxemburg. As KPD leader in 1919-21 Levi often cited and praised her, sometimes even daring to say that on some points Luxemburg had been right and the Bolsheviks wrong. Yet in those same years Levi worked closely with Lenin and Trotsky. Lenin recognized, in David Fernbach's words, that "the Bolshevik experience had been too Russian to generalize to the countries of advanced capitalism, and recognized the need to build mass revolutionary parties." (11)

Levi had even closer ties with Karl Radek, who had begun his political life as a member of Luxemburg's Polish party (the SDKPiL) and in Levi's time represented the Communist International (Comintern) in Germany. In two years Levi and Radek together built the KPD up from a small, persecuted group to a mass party of hundreds of thousands of workers. As Radek's biographer sums up his role, Radek defended the authority of the Comintern Executive, but he defended a political course developed in collaboration with Levi. Radek himself said when Stuttgart workers gave the united front tactic its first formulation, "If I had been in Moscow, the idea would not even have crossed my mind."[1]

Building the KPD was no easy task. *In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg*, a collection of Levi's speeches and articles published in the Historical Materialism book series, gives a clear picture of how hard Levi had to fight against the ultraleftists who believed they could overthrow the new German republic from one day to the next, without dirtying their hands with parliamentary elections or trade union work. Levi argued tirelessly against them for patience and perseverance. He

constantly stressed the importance, in Luxemburg's words, of "the unification of the broad popular masses with an aim reaching beyond the whole existing social order." (165) The texts in the collection reveal Levi as an inspired tactician of revolutionary politics in a parliamentary democracy. Socialists in the United States and Europe still have much to learn from him today.

Against Lenin

IN EARLY 1921, nevertheless, Levi and the Bolsheviks came to a parting of the ways. The immediate occasion was a bungled split in Italy, when Comintern representatives alienated the great majority of Italian socialists by attacking a leadership that (whatever its faults) identified with communism. When a majority of the KPD central committee sided with the Comintern leadership against Levi on the issue, Levi resigned in February as chair. Within weeks the new KPD leadership tried to prove itself by organizing an insurrection, the March Action. The result was a crushing defeat and fierce repression.

Inside the party Levi's critical voice was stifled. He chose to publish a brochure attacking the rationale behind the March Action: *Our Path: Against Putschism*. The KPD leadership saw this as an act of betrayal in a time of emergency. Levi was promptly expelled.

Levi's expulsion put Lenin and Trotsky in a difficult position. They largely agreed with the substance of Levi's criticisms. But *Our Path* hit them too in a sensitive spot, making sarcastic remarks about second-rate Communists sent out from Moscow to meddle in the movement in other countries. In June 1921 the Comintern congress rejected the new KPD leadership's "strategy of the offensive," but also rejected Levi's appeal against his expulsion. At the same time Lenin wrote, "We should not lose Levi." (22) He suggested that Levi could eventually return to the KPD if he demonstrated his willingness to respect party discipline.

This was not particularly consistent with the record of Lenin's own party. The Bolsheviks had a long tradition of fierce public debates: even when Zinoviev and Kamenev had publicly attacked the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 they had not been expelled from the party or its leadership. But the Bolsheviks had been a far more open and democratic party in 1917 than they had become by 1921.

In the SPD

LEVI SHOWED NO SIGN of willingness to play by Lenin's rules. Initially he seemed to believe that the Communists needed him and would eventually readmit him on his own terms. Then in 1922, when he realized that that was not going to happen, his group returned to the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), which the KPD had split from in 1918. In late 1922 Levi didn't even oppose the USPD's reunification with the right-wing reformists of the SPD. He remained an SPD member, and even an SPD Reichstag member, until his death in 1930.

In his introduction to *In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg*, David Fernbach writes that if Luxemburg had still been alive, she "would surely have put up more of a struggle than Levi against a return to the SPD." (32) That is putting it mildly. The SPD that Levi joined was not only reformist but strictly disciplined; its leadership had the means and the will to muzzle revolutionary critics. A recent Ph.D. thesis on Levi comments that he was "practically reduced to silence inside the SPD institutions": banned from its newspaper *Vorwärts*, allowed only minimal speaking time at party congresses, and even then persistently heckled.[2] Although he founded his own journal in 1923, even in its pages he had to be somewhat circumspect in expressing the criticisms that Luxemburg and he had both made of the SPD leadership: of its lack of combativeness, its legal and parliamentary cretinism, and its support for German foreign policy.

Even if entry into the SPD was a defensible tactic, the question is what course Levi followed inside it. Since his activities in 1918-21 were already reasonably well known from Pierre Broué's magisterial history of the German revolution (also published in English as part of the Historical Materialism series), *In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg* is valuable mainly for the light it sheds on Levi's last years. Unfortunately the book does not shed terribly much. By Fernbach's account, Levi simply wrote less after 1922. Instead he devoted more time and energy to his work as a lawyer, representing many left-wing defendants victimized under the Weimar republic by reactionary judges inherited from the monarchy.

The writings included in *In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg* in any event give a mixed picture of Levi's politics in the 1920s. For example, questions are raised by Levi's few writings in 1923, when French military intervention, hyperinflation and mass unemployment brought the republican regime to the verge of collapse. In general, though he wrote that the crisis "would have been an incontestable stroke of luck for the Communists if they really were Communists" (259), he showed little sympathy for Trotsky's assertion in *The Lessons of October* that it had been a great missed opportunity for a German revolution. Levi seems to have believed that the left had been so badly defeated in 1921 that it would be many years before revolution could be put back on the agenda in Germany. He remained a strong critic of the SPD leadership — especially of its participation in coalition governments with bourgeois parties, notably from August to November 1923 — but seems to have been more indulgent with the party's vacillating left wing. He wrote how outrageous the "illegal and unconstitutional act of violence" (330) was by which the government in Berlin deposed the democratically elected coalition government of Communists and left-wing Social Democrats in the state of Saxony in October 1923, but failed to mention that the Saxon Social Democrats' failure to resist doomed a planned Communist uprising and wasted whatever potential there may have been in the situation.

Levi's attitude toward the Weimar republic was in fact contradictory. He wrote that while the republic was bourgeois, the workers had to defend it, "even in the form in which it exists today," against the far right. (288) His warnings of the Nazi danger from 1923 on were prophetic. But he was confusing two different things (as Ernest Mandel defined them): democratic freedoms, which "are an absolute gain that we aim not merely to defend but to consolidate and deepen," and bourgeois democratic state institutions, which often curtail those freedoms when capitalism is threatened.[3]

On Russia

FROM 1922 ON Levi gave up not only on the KPD and short-term revolutionary possibilities, but also on the Russian revolution. By publishing Rosa Luxemburg's 1918 critique of the Bolsheviks, he rightly reaffirmed her intransigent defense of democracy — and anticipated Max Shachtman's insistence that the working class can rule only through some form of workers' democracy. Here too, however, Levi's complete dismissal of the Bolsheviks was in some respects questionable. He failed to appreciate the paradoxical character of Lenin and Trotsky's politics in the pivotal years 1921 and 1922.

The months after the civil war, as the Bolsheviks launched the New Economic Policy (NEP), also saw their elimination of the last remnants of multiparty democracy in the soviets, notably with the final expulsion and suppression of the Menshevik Internationalists and anarchists. Yet Lenin and Trotsky maintained that their political course in Russia, an isolated and overwhelmly peasant country, was the exception in Communist politics, not the rule. In those same months, particularly at the third and fourth Comintern congresses, they insisted that communism could triumph in Western Europe and especially Germany only by winning a majority in the democratic arenas of workers councils and factory committees, which would be the basis of socialist democracy. In the last months

of Lenin's conscious life he was increasingly aware of the dangers of bureaucratic rule even in Russia. As for Trotsky, an extreme defender of militaristic and authoritarian measures in 1921, he began by 1923, at first reluctantly and inconsistently, to wage the fight against the bureaucratic dictatorship that would take up the rest of his life.

Yet Levi wanted nothing to do with Trotsky's Left Opposition — partly, curiously enough, because he agreed with and exaggerated one of Trotsky's fatally mistaken analyses. Levi saw the adoption of the NEP and its concessions to smallholders, traders, and petty capitalists as proof that Soviet Russia had become a petty bourgeois dictatorship, where nothing remained of proletarian rule. (249) Trotsky for his part saw the NEP, if not as a return to capitalism, as a breeding ground for the petty bourgeois "Thermidorian reaction" he saw as the greatest threat to the revolution. They were both wrong. By 1929 it was not the kulaks and Nepmen who triumphed — they were slaughtered en masse — but Stalin's bureaucracy. As Stephen Cohen has remarked, the great tragedy of the 1920s was that anti-Stalinist Marxists spent the decade battling each other instead of their main enemy.

Legacy

DESPITE HIS MISTAKES Levi did a great deal, both before and after 1921, to keep democratic Marxism alive. It should have been possible decades ago to read his own account of his positions. Until now very little by him has been available in English. This makes *In The Steps of Rosa Luxemburg* a publication of great value for the international anti-capitalist left. Fernbach (whose grandfather was a member of Luxemburg's Spartacus League) has selected and edited the texts skillfully and introduced the volume with erudition, concision and political acumen.

Fernbach argues convincingly that a "politics of majority-revolution" (1) in Luxemburg's spirit is crucial for anti-capitalist politics today. I would add that there is also much of value to retain in the legacy of Lenin, Trotsky and those who followed their lead. On a crucial democratic principle like the right to national self-determination, for example, we have much more to learn from them than from her. They arguably acted in a more democratic spirit than Luxemburg by dividing Russia's great landed estates among the peasants, rather than nationalizing them as Luxemburg urged — even Levi later admitted that Luxemburg's fear that once the peasant had land he would "crawl behind his stove," deserting the revolution, had been "disproved." (229) And the Bolsheviks' dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 reflected their profound appreciation of the grassroots democracy of the soviets, of which Luxemburg seemed more dubious.

Yet none of this detracts from the justice of Luxemburg's sharp-eyed criticism in 1918: "Lenin and Trotsky have laid down the soviets as the only true representation of the laboring masses. But with the repression of political life in the land as a whole, life in the soviets must also become more and more crippled. Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element."[4] As Paul Levi added in his 1921 introduction: "to banish parties as parties, … by police-measures, … was, for Rosa Luxemburg, an impossible idea: not for the sake of the reformists, but for that of the revolution and the revolutionaries themselves, who can also triumph inwardly only if they combat mistakes freely." (252)

Neither Luxemburg nor Levi, any more than Lenin or Trotsky, offered a solution to the conundrum we face today: how to build a democratic movement against capitalism that succumbs neither to the temptation of pasting a human face on neoliberal austerity nor to illusions about anti-capitalist breakthroughs in the short or middle run. But in the prolonged Gramscian "war of position" that lies ahead, Luxemburg and Levi's unwavering commitment to democracy will remain

indispensable.