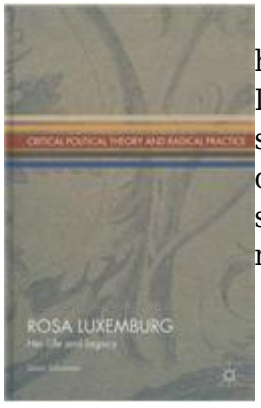
Rosa Luxemburg—a revolutionary for our time, or a liberal?

written by Ingo Schmidt | April 29, 2014

Review of Jason Schulman (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg — Her Life and Legacy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 214 pp.

In 2001, New Politics published a short article on Rosa Luxemburg by Stephen Bronner. The article sure hit a nerve. Over the next years, a whole series of criticisms were published to which Bronner responded twice in these pages. Jason Schulman collected these articles, added a short introduction and an interview with Bronner, and published them under the title *Rosa Luxemburg—Her Life and Legacy*. The subtitle of the book is slightly misleading as it contains little about Luxemburg's life and the term legacy is too neutral to capture the intensity with which contributors fought over their respective understandings of Luxemburg's theoretical and political work. Playing on Bronner's 1981 monograph *Rosa Luxemburg—A Revolutionary for Our Time*[1], it might have been more apt to ask whether that's still what she is or whether she became an inspiration for liberals in the meantime. Bronner contends that socialism and barbarism are no longer alternatives since efforts to build the former only advanced the latter and the industrial proletariat as the agent of change is on the wane. At the same time, though, Luxemburg's revolutionary goal of attaining a liberal republican state has been achieved since Soviet power was dismantled by the liberal revolution in Eastern Europe. What socialists should do now is defend the reforms that have been won within the realm of the liberal state and extend their activities to reforming international institutions, as transnational corporations are progressively undermining nation-state sovereignty.



Bronner claims that he criticizes Luxemburg in much the same way she had criticized Marx. What emerged from this for Bronner was the rejection of Luxemburg's claim that capitalist crises make social reform impossible and that socialist revolution, paving the way for workers' power exerted through workers' councils, would be the only way of avoiding the barbaric degeneration of capitalist societies. What remains of Luxemburg is the fighter for the democratic republic, minority rights, and liberal, not proletarian, internationalism.

This interpretation might have been much to the liking of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Berlin, for whom Bronner's article was originally written. The Luxemburg Foundation, a think-tank affiliated with the Party of Democratic Socialism, now Die Linke, was eager to leave behind the communist past out of which it had developed. At the same time, it was trying to carve out its political space in post-unification Germany. A Luxemburg that had nothing more to do with overcoming private property but still provided a critical edge vis-à-vis actually existing capitalism

was precisely what was needed for this purpose. But it certainly wasn't what many people around *New Politics*, used to defending the traditions of revolutionary socialism in the belly of the beast, wanted to hear. Not surprisingly, they responded in kind. As a then editorial board member and continuing sponsor of the journal, Bronner probably knew what he was getting himself into.

None of Bronner's critics misses the opportunity to point to the continuities of capitalist exploitation and the support it receives from nation-states and international institutions. More specifically, Alan Johnson draws attention to the fact that today's working classes make up a larger share of the world population than they did during Luxemburg's lifetime. Hence, the notion of a waning of the industrial proletariat is misleading. David Camfield charges Bronner with joining the post-Marxist camp whose ranks of disappointed radicals swelled continuously while the neoliberal variant of capitalism came to be seen more and more as the social order without alternative. Paul LeBlanc argues that Bronner's support for international institutions includes imperialist interventions and Barry Finger turns Bronner's claim that revolutionary socialism is outdated around by saying that the conditions under which embedded liberalism could flourish are gone. All of this may, or may not be true, but doesn't take away from the fact that revolutionary workers movement don't exist anywhere today. Therefore it is easy for Bronner to expose his critics' defense of revolutionary socialism as a kind of ethical commitment, different from his own in content but as detached from current realities as were the scientific convictions about the inevitable victory of socialism over capitalism that were, allegedly, so characteristic of Luxemburg and most of her contemporaries.

Considering the complete marginalization of revolutionary socialists in today's social movements it should be an easy task for Bronner to answer his critics. Yet, there is a tone of self-assurance and impatience in his responses that suggests that he isn't as convinced of his case as he pretends to be. In restating his case for the liberal republic and reformed international institutions he even takes refuge in empirically unsupported and theoretically inconsistent arguments. For example, he charges Luxemburg with splitting the social democratic left and thus allowing the right wing around Ebert to gain the upper hand within the social democratic party. Of course, one might direct the same charge against Bernstein during the revisionism debate or Kautsky during the mass strike debate. Be this as it may. What is difficult to understand, though, is how he squares his concern with a left united for democracy and republicanism with his endorsement of the Weimar-period SPD as defenders of these very principles. To this end, he invokes the apologetic argument that Weimar was a republic without republicans. Yet, looking at folks like Tucholsky, von Ossietzky and their Weltbühne-collaborators it seems more accurate to say that there was a small band of republicans desperately looking for a republic.[2] Michael Hirsch in his concluding chapter discusses Bronner's skewed interpretation of Weimar. By the way, in his 1991 book *Moments of Decision*[3] Bronner also pointed to the continuities between imperial Germany and Weimar. While he changed his views on the Weimar Republic, the commitment to liberal democracy and international institutions that he presented to the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation can already be found in this book. In fact, its German translation, published in 1999, might have been the reason why the Luxemburg Foundation invited Bronner to the talk that caused so much controversy in *New Politics*.

Entwined with the discussion of the virtues and insufficiencies of the liberal republic is the question of whether councils can represent an alternative institutional framework or not. Councils, argue Bronner and Michael Thompson, represent only the special interests of industrial workers. Historically, councils only played a role in countries lacking liberal institutions; today there is no interest in them whatsoever. All one could possibly say to defend this line of argument is that those who wanted to replace the bourgeois republic by a councils republic focused very much on industrial workers. This is true, for example, for Richard Müller and Emil Däumig but also for Anton Pannekoek. Despite their commitment to the councils republic, the former sided politically with the

Independent Social Democrats[4] while the latter joined the anarcho-syndicalist Communist Workers Party.[5] Neither of them went with Luxemburg and the Spartacists. Bronner rightly points out that Luxemburg was torn between councils and the republic but wrongly says that she had to choose one or the other. With support for the councils too weak to erect an alternative power structure in 1918/19 such a decision would inevitably subject the newly formed republic to the old alliance between the Junkers, smokestack barons, and generals whose internal quarrels had been a major factor leading Imperial Germany to war.[6]

Luxemburg thought councils might serve as a countervailing power to the forces of reaction, and thus make Weimar a more democratic republic and leave the door for socialist revolution open. The tragedy of the German revolution is that this line of thinking was only understood and supported by marginal circles such as that around the Weltbühne, while the labor movement from anarcho-syndicalists to Ebert-Noske-style social democrats made their respective choices for insurrection and councils or counterrevolution approved by the Weimar Republic. Dual power of the liberal republic and councils might also have allowed the latter to extend beyond industrial workers and soldiers to workers in other sectors, most importantly agriculture, and consumers. Such ideas were discussed theoretically after the counterrevolution had already shut down the possibility of their realization. Karl Korsch made important contributions to this debate, the first of which was published in March 1919 when the revolution was just coming to an end.[7] Although he frequently appears in Schulman's book, this aspect of his work is ignored or flat-handedly dismissed. As far as later developments are concerned it is worth mentioning that councils were established on numerous occasions and in countries with rather different political systems.[8] It is simply not true that workers never established councils in liberal democracies; the point is that they did so in situations in which they felt not appropriately represented by unions and the political system. This history of self-organization has plenty of experiences to offer from which today's social movements can learn when seeking alternatives to liberal democracy's surrender to the dictates of international capital as Chris Maisano argues in his chapter of the book. Bronner confirms his skeptical views about the potential of workers councils in an interview that reviews the preceding debate at the end of the book. What is more interesting about this interview, though, are the connections Bronner makes between Luxemburg in her day and today's social movements from the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and Syriza. In this respect he stresses the role of experiences activists are making in collective struggles for the formation of progressive movements.

One argument that transcends the councils versus republic debate, which figures so prominently in most chapters of the book, comes from Amber Frost. Her starting point is a rebuttal of Thompson's unambiguous defense of liberal democracy as the only institutional form capable of protecting the rights of minorities for which he cites gay marriage as an example. Frost picks this up to show how easily radical politics, such as feminist and queer activists struggles against the legal institution of marriage, are sidelined by the endorsement of apparently progressive issues. Her warnings against states permeating every aspect of life are more than welcome in a time where neoliberal ideology heralds the withering away of the state in the thin air of global markets. Yet, bringing feminism into this book about Luxemburg, she could have gone further. It is true that Luxemburg had little to no interest in what was called in her day the women's question, but her economic theory of the colonization of non-capitalist milieus offers analytical tools to understand the transformation of domestic labor and female labor market participation from post-war prosperity until today. Sadly, many feminists engaged in the domestic labor debate recognized the affinity between their own efforts and Luxemburg's theorizing but decided not to draw on the latter although it might have made their arguments stronger.[9]

Frost shares the silence on Luxemburg's economic theory with her co-authors. Bronner sees it as an outdated teleology that might have had currency in the past but certainly has none today.

Moreover, he explicitly claims the primacy of what he calls the political moment over economics. Thompson, who agrees with Bronner on the question of republic versus councils, posits the necessity for critical political economy for radical politics of any kind but doesn't give any hints as to how he understands the relations between economics and politics. Johnson and Camfield, standing on the other side of the republic versus council argument, distance themselves from what they see as a mistaken theory of breakdown. Maisano takes the Great Recession as his starting point but quickly departs into the realm of pure politics. This neglect of economics grossly misrepresents Luxemburg's work. This is not only true for her explicitly economic works, notably *The Accumulation of Capital* and *The Introduction to Political Economy*, but also for her political works that reckon the role of economics. For example, she hints at the limits to social reform due to the recurrence of economic crises in *Social Reform or Revolution* and *The Mass Strike* and in *The Junius Pamphlet* she reconstructs the outbreak of World War I from the pursuit of imperialist politics, driven by the quest for market expansion, great power status, and attempts to deflect from domestic class conflict.

Bronner suggests that Luxemburg's adherence to a teleological worldview—her belief in the final victory of socialism—is plainly wrong, and can't be substantiated. Sure did she believe in it; one might even claim that her activism was driven by ethical beliefs that Bronner presents as an alternative to teleological beliefs. Nobody would engage in any kind of politics if s/he didn't think s/he could succeed. Yet, this doesn't mean that the optimism of the will can't or shouldn't be complemented by the pessimism of the intellect. Chances to reach one's goals are surely greater if one recognizes the economic conditions under which one pursues them instead of ignoring them.

If all Luxemburg had to offer in this respect was the assurance that capitalism would collapse and thereby fire the starting shot for class struggle or even lead to the automatic rise of socialism, then her economic theory would be as teleological as Bronner claims it is. But it isn't.[10] Like her contemporaries she used the word "breakdown" all too often and the term invites teleological understandings indeed. To avoid them it might be good to poke fun at it like Joan Robinson did with Marx's use of the morally charged term "exploitation." Yet, Robinson didn't do this to dismiss Marx's economics but to reinvent them during her own lifetime. Sure enough, what came out of this was the conversion of Marx into a proto-Keynesian[11] and Luxemburg received the same treatment.[12] Even if one doesn't agree with Robinson's interpretation of Marx and Luxemburg one might find more interesting ideas in it than in mere restatements of Marx's and Luxemburg's original work. Bronner is right, these works need to be read and interpreted for everyone's own time and this will inevitably lead to revisions. In today's world where everyone talks about economics, 99% fearful and 1% hopeful, socialists have every reason to re-read the classics of critical political economy, reinterpret them against the background of today's empirical realities and draw their conclusions for radical politics. This is not the same as suggesting to derive politics from economics. The purpose of Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* was to highlight human agency behind the mystifications of commodity production and exchange. Luxemburg's economic works continued this tradition by stressing the role of class struggles and international conflicts in capitalist development. They can certainly contribute to the way that activists interpret their everyday experiences with capitalist realities, share them with workers and other subordinated social groups and thus help to remake the working classes that were so successfully unmade by neoliberal restructuring.[13] We shall see, whether there'll be a revolution. What is certain, though, is that Luxemburg is a socialist for our times and this sure means seeking ways to overcome capitalism.

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[1] Stephen Eric Bronner, *Rosa Luxemburg—A Revolutionary for Our Times* (London: Pluto Press, 1981).

[2] Ursula Madrasch-Groschopp, *Die Weltbühne—Portrait einer Zeitschrift* (Berlin, Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1985).

[3] Stephen Eric Bronner, *Moments of Decision—Political History and the Crisis of Radicalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

[4] Ralf Hoffrogge, *Richard Müller—Der Mann hinter der Novemberrevolution* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 2008).

[5] Hans Manfred Bock, *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus von 1918 bis 1933* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993).

[6] Heiner Karuscheit, *Deutschland 1914—Vom Klassenkompromiss zum Krieg* (Hamburg: VSA Verlag, 2013).

[7] Karl Korsch, *Schriften zur Sozialisierung* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969).

[8] Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzelini, *Ours to Master and to Own—Workers Control From the Commune to the Present* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011).

[9] Frieder Otto Wolf, "The Missed Rendezvous of Critical Marxism and Ecological Feminism," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2007), 109-125.

[10] Ingo Schmidt, "Geschichte und Sozialismus," in Ingo Schmidt (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg's Akkumulation des Kapitals* (Hamburg: VSA Verlag, 2013), 138-165.

[11] Joan Robinson, *An Essay on Marxian Economics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1967).

[12] Joan Robinson, "Introduction," in Rosa Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), xxi-xxxvii.

[13] Ingo Schmidt, "From Unmaking to Remaking—Neoliberalism and European Working Class Experiences," in Andreas Bieler (ed.), *Labour and Transnational Action in Times of Crisis* (forthcoming).