Rosa Luxemburg for Today

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BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY:
Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy
Edited by Jason Schulman
Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 214 pp.

The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg: Volume I: Economic Writings 1
Edited by Peter Hudis
Verso, 2013, 596 pp.

Red Rosa
Conceived and illustrated by Kate Evans and edited by Paul Buhle
Forthcoming, Verso, 2015

Rosa Luxemburg, a heroic and principled figure of the left, died in 1919 at the hands of the right-wing German Social Democratic Party (SPD) leadership's militarist *Freikorps* (Volunteer Corps) allies. When they murdered her and her comrade Karl Leibknecht and threw their bodies into Berlin's Landwehr Canal, they made Luxemburg a martyr for the socialist workers' movement. A Polish-German secular Jew, a Marxist political economist and theorist, Luxemburg was a prominent leader of the left wing of the SPD, founder of the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, and, later, of the Spartacus League and the German Communist Party.

Luxemburg lived and wrote during the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution and was witness to historical conditions ripe for actively rethinking socialist theory and practice. The episodic resurrection of Luxemburg's political thought continues to inflame the political imagination of socialists committed to belief in the democratic possibilities of mass resistance and faith in the long-run capacity of the working class to rebel against capitalism, as demonstrated in her theory of spontaneity. Today, the protests in Tahrir Square, of the *indignados* in Spain, of Turkish activists in Gezi Park, the *piqueteros* in Argentina, the SYRIZA Party in Greece, Occupy Wall Street, and many other forms of popular resistance indicate that Luxemburg could appeal to yet another generation. She, too, grappled with what socialist parties and activists should and could do in relation to such protests.

Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy, edited by *Democratic Left* advisory board member Jason Schulman, underscores Luxemburg's major contributions to socialism during the years of the Second (Socialist) International and her relevance for contemporary socialist thought. The original impetus behind this project came from Stephen Eric Bronner's essay "Red Dreams and the New Millennium: Notes on the Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg," published in the socialist journal *New Politics* in 2001. Bronner's article sparked a debate among *New Politics* writers over the proper interpretation of Luxemburg's ideas for current socialist politics in light of new historic conditions.

Schulman brings together the *New Politics* debate with new essays on Luxemburg that offer

reflections on political events that have transpired since 2001, including popular resistance to austerity measures both here and abroad. Among the new contributors are DSA activists (and *DL* writers) Amber Frost, Chris Maisano, and Michael Hirsch. The inter-generational approach of this collection reads as if one were listening to the debate in real time. Almost a hundred years after her death, Luxemburg still courts controversy.

Below, I highlight a few points from the DSA contingent because they demonstrate Luxemburg's steadfast commitments to radical democracy and internationalism. The only potential weakness of the book is the lack of attention to Luxemburg's contributions regarding the conditions of women, of which more later.

The primary contention in the original debate among Bronner, Alan Johnson, and David Camfield is over the "meaning of socialism under modern conditions." Bronner argues, "Whatever else the term [socialism] might imply, it must initially be understood as a practice intent upon mitigating the whip of the market *through* the state and abolishing the exercise of arbitrary power *by* the state." Bronner points to Luxemburg's recognition of the necessity of translating economic reform into political demands, including the ultimate goal of revolution. In this regard, she is famous for her debates with Eduard Bernstein against his argument for "evolutionary socialism," or the idea that socialism will gradually evolve out of economic reform. Today, the call for democratic socialism, Bronner argues, is "predicated on little more than an ethical commitment." In general, Johnson and Camfield argue with Bronner over points of interpretation of Luxemburg as well as current political-economic conditions.

Frost, a self-proclaimed activist and non-academic, argues that the participants in this debate are "indulging in Freud's 'narcissism of minor differences,' and subsequently side-stepping more productive debate." She criticizes other contributors for their "lack of faith in the resilience of Marxism in the face of detractors and assaults," and takes Michael Thompson, especially, to task for his expressed doubts about the political effectiveness of workers' councils. In the spirit of Luxemburg's undying commitment to democracy for the masses, in contrast to Lenin's supposed notion of the revolutionary vanguard party implanting revolutionary consciousness into the proletariat, Frost defends the democratic potential of workers' councils by considering ways that the model might be improved and developed as an indispensable organizational form of political education.

In "Where Do We Go from Here? Rosa Luxemburg and the Crisis of Democratic Capitalism," Maisano frames his essay around the tension between capitalism and democracy. Echoing Luxemburg's international commitment, Maisano's analysis of popular movements extends beyond the United States in his discussion of the political context in Greece, Italy, Germany, France, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Maisano argues that the appeal of popular movements rests in their democratic nature and offers an explanation as to why "these movements have tended to reject parties, representation, and the state *in toto*":

> "People today have very little control over anything that happens in their lives. They feel like playthings of powerful forces that are not subject to even a modicum of democratic accountability or control. This is what accounts for the relentless focus of movements like Occupy on process and consensus."

Maisano summarizes the debates in the book as revolving around two conflicting approaches, with Bronner and Michael Thompson arguing for an approach that appreciates the potentially liberatory qualities of the republican state and gradualist programs of radical reform, and Alan Johnson, David Camfield, Paul Le Blanc, and Barry Finger defending a revolutionary councilist tradition that seeks to overthrow the republican state and replace it with a network of direct organs of popular control.

In siding with Bronner and Thompson, Maisano underscores that Luxemburg's legacy includes both direct action and "the need for political representation, leadership, and discipline." This nuanced approach allows Maisano to argue that democracy is both "direct *and* representative," horizontal *and* vertical. This same argument goes for our understanding of the state, "one that allows for a significant amount of space for popular participation in policy making and administration" as well as of a political party involving "a broad formation that allows for radicals of different persuasions to come together in a pluralistic and egalitarian institutional space."

Speaking from decades of experience on the left, Hirsch, in "Contra Bronner on Luxemburg and Working-Class Revolution," argues that Luxemburg's strengths lay in viewing history as an interactive process, not a dislocated series of events. She understood, long before Edward Thompson, that social classes were relationships and not categories or things. Luxemburg, with her long view that working people had to be prepared—not just persuaded or anxious—to rule, is an enigma for those conditioned to think revolutions are made by clusters of dedicated operatives, rather than as an expression of a class in formation evolving in experience, consciousness, collective action, and social conditions.

In response to Bronner's argument that socialism is today only an ethical commitment, Hirsch argues, "From the standpoint of class struggle, socialism is not an ethical ideal or a consumer choice; it's a necessity for survival as a culture and as a species."

Unfortunately, the collection fails to mention Luxemburg's contributions regarding the condition of women, namely their formal political exclusion despite their intense informal political involvement. Bronner is on record saying, "There is no use artificially trying to turn [Luxemburg] into a forerunner of feminist theory or practice." Although it is true that Luxemburg never privileged an identity-based politics, surely she was an advocate of what would later become known as socialist feminism. After all, she agreed with Charles Fourier's assessment that "In any society, the degree of female emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation."

Schulman has brought together a collection that should be read widely and used in study groups. In addition, I recommend *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg: Volume I: Economic Writings 1,* edited by Peter Hudis and recently released by Verso. This is the first in an ambitious series of Luxemburg's writings. It contains not only works that have never appeared in English, but also a new translation of her doctoral thesis and ten previously undiscovered manuscripts.

Next year, Verso will publish a graphic biographical novel, *Red Rosa*, written by Kate Evans and edited by Paul Buhle. Evans generously shared a few advance images, shown here. Evans's book was made possible by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation of Berlin, which, thanks to the funding given to German political parties based on electoral returns, has now opened an office in New York. The NYC office has become a central location for funding, research, and support for the promotion of democratic socialism in the United States, keeping the legacy of Luxemburg and her thought alive.

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