

The Internationalism of Rosa Luxemburg

Throughout her political life, Rosa Luxemburg remained committed to an internationalist version of socialism – one which fought for the working-class beyond national boundaries and against imperialism.



Rosa Luxemburg and other international socialist leaders at the Amsterdam Congress of the Second International, 1904.

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Few Marxist thinkers were more committed to socialism's internationalist programme than Rosa Luxemburg. She was Jewish, Polish, and German, but her one and only "motherland" was the Socialist International. It is true, however, that this radical internationalism led her to take questionable positions on the national question.

For instance, concerning her native country, Poland, she not only opposed the call for Polish national independence raised by the "social-patriots" of Piłsudski's Polish Socialist Party (PPS), but even rejected Bolshevik support for Poland's right to self-determination (including the right to separate from Russia). Until 1914 she would base her views on "economistic" arguments: Poland was already integrated into the Russian economy, and therefore Polish independence was a purely utopian demand shared only by reactionary aristocratic or petty-bourgeois layers.

She also conceived of nations as essentially "cultural" phenomena, proposing "cultural autonomy" as the solution for national demands. Missing in her approach is precisely the *political* dimension of the national question as emphasised in Lenin's writings on the topic: the *democratic right* to self-determination.

However, at least in one article, she stated the problem in a much more open and dialectical way: the 1905 introduction to the collection [The Polish Question and the Socialist Movement](#). In this essay she draws a careful distinction between the legitimate right of every nation to independence—"which flowed directly from the most elementary principles of socialism"—

and the *desirability* of this independence for Poland, which she rejected. She also insisted that national oppression is “the most intolerably barbaric oppression”, and can only provoke “wrathful, fanatical rebellion”. Yet some years later, in her 1918 notebook on the [Russian Revolution](#)—which contains highly valuable criticisms of the Bolsheviks’ curtailments of democracy and freedom—she once again rejects any reference to the nation’s right to self-determination as “hollow, petty-bourgeois *phraseology*”. Most discussions of Rosa Luxemburg’s internationalism deal mainly—and sometimes only—with her (indeed questionable) thesis on national rights. What is missing here is the *positive* side of her views: her outstanding contribution to the Marxist conception of proletarian internationalism, and her stubborn refusal to give in to nationalist and chauvinist ideologies.

Workers of the World, Unite!

Georg Lukács, in his chapter on [“The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg”](#) in *History and Class-Consciousness* (1923), argued that the dialectical category of totality is the “bearer of the principle of revolution in science”. He saw Rosa Luxemburg’s writings, especially her [Accumulation of Capital](#) (1913), as a striking example of this dialectical approach.

Nevertheless, the same thing can be said of her internationalism: she judges, analyses, and discusses all social and political issues from the viewpoint of totality, i.e. from the perspective of the interests of the international working-class movement.

This dialectical totality was not an abstraction, an empty universalism, or a conglomerate of undifferentiated beings: she knew well that the international proletariat was a human plurality composed of people with their own cultures, languages, and histories; their conditions of life and work were also very different.

In *Accumulation of Capital* there is a long description of forced labour in the mines and plantations of South Africa—nothing equivalent could be found in German factories. But this diversity was not to be understood as an obstacle to common action: in other words, internationalism meant for her, as for Marx and Engels, “*Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!*”—the *unity* of workers from all countries against their common enemy: the capitalist system, imperialism, and imperialist wars.

This is why, soon after her arrival in Germany and entry into the ranks of German Social Democracy, she refused to make any concessions to militarism, military credits, or naval expeditions. While the Social Democratic right wing (people like Wolfgang Heine and Max Schippel) were willing to negotiate agreements with the Kaiser’s government on these issues, she openly denounced such capitulations, supposedly justified by the “need to create jobs”.

Solidarity Without Borders

Unlike so many other socialists of her time, for Luxemburg internationalism was not limited to the European countries. She actively opposed European colonialism early on, and did not hide her sympathy for the struggles of the colonial peoples. This naturally included German colonial wars in Africa, such as the [brutal repression of the Herero uprising](#) in German South West Africa in 1904.

In a public speech held in June 1911, she explained:

“The Herero are a negro people, who have lived for centuries in their homeland ... Their ‘crime’ was that they did not give in to white slave-drivers ... and defended their land against foreign invaders. ... In this war, too, the German weapons were richly covered with—glory. ... The men were shot, the women and children ... pushed into the burning desert.”

While she condemned German imperialist pretensions (against France) in North Africa—the so-called [“Morocco incident”](#) in 1911, when Germany sent its war boats to Agadir—she described French colonialism in Algeria as a [violent attempt to impose bourgeois private property](#) against the ancient clan communism of the Arab tribes.

In her lectures on political economy at the Social Democratic Party school in 1907–1908, she emphasised the connection between the modern communism of the proletarian masses in the advanced capitalist countries and the “ancient communist survivals that put up stubborn resistance in the colonial countries to the forward march of profit-hungry” imperial domination.

In her most important economic essay, [*The Accumulation of Capital*](#), she argued that capitalist accumulation on global scale was not only an early stage but a permanent process of violent expropriation:

“The accumulation of capital, seen as an historical process, employs force as a permanent weapon, not only in its genesis, but further on down to the present day. From the point of view of the primitive societies involved, it is a matter of life or death; for them there can be no other attitude than opposition and fight to the finish ... Hence permanent occupation of the colonies by the military, native risings and punitive expeditions are the order of the day for any colonial regime.”

Very few socialists at that time not only denounced colonial expeditions but justified the colonised people’s resistance and struggle. This attitude reveals the truly universal nature of her internationalism—even if, of course, Europe was at the centre of her attention.

Consistently Anti-War

Rosa Luxemburg saw clearly enough the rising danger of a European war, and never ceased to denounce the Imperial German government’s war preparations. On 13 September 1913 she gave a talk in Bockenheim, a town near Frankfurt am Main, that ended with a solemn internationalist statement: “If they think we are going to lift the weapons of murder against our French and other brethren, then we shall shout: we will never do it!”

The public prosecutor immediately charged her with “calling for public disobedience of the law”. The trial took place in February 1914, and Rosa Luxemburg gave a fearless speech attacking militarism and war policies and quoting a resolution from the 1868 Brussels conference of the First International: in case of war, the workers should call a general strike. The talk appeared in the socialist press and became a sort of classic of anti-war literature. She was sentenced to one year in jail, but only after the war began, in 1915, did the Imperial authorities dare to arrest her.

While so many other European socialists and Marxists supported their own governments at the outbreak of World War I in the name of “defending the Fatherland”, she immediately sought to organise opposition to the imperialist war. Her writings during these first crucial months make no concessions to the aggressive official “patriotic” ideology, and develop increasingly critical arguments against the SPD leadership’s wretched betrayal of the principles of proletarian internationalism.

Trying to explain what he calls her “growing hatred” of the SPD’s policies, J.P. Nettl [points to](#) a “strong personal element”: “the eternal, ill-suppressed impatience and frustration of émigrés like Rosa Luxemburg with the ponderous and ‘official’ Germans.”

As Nettl is forced to admit, however, opposition to the war was not limited to foreign “émigrés” but included several authentically German figures, such as Karl Liebknecht, Franz Mehring, and Clara Zetkin. Rosa Luxemburg’s indignation against the social-patriotic capitulation of August 1914 was thus motivated not by “émigré impatience”, but a life-long commitment to internationalism.

Jailed several times for her anti-militarist and anti-nationalist propaganda, she summarised her principled standpoint in an essay from 1916 titled [*Either/Or*](#): “The fatherland of the proletariat, the defence of which must take precedence over all else, is the socialist International.”

The Second International had collapsed under the impact of what she called “social-

chauvinism”, substituting “Proletarians of all countries, unite!” with “Proletarians of all countries, cut each other’s throats!” In response, Luxemburg issued a call for the creation of a *new International*. Writing down her proposal for the basic principles of this future International, she emphasised:

“There can be no socialism outside the international solidarity of the proletariat and there can be no socialism without class struggle. The socialist proletariat cannot renounce the class struggle and international solidarity, either in war or in peace, without committing suicide.” This was, of course, an answer to Karl Kautsky’s hypocritical argument that the International was a tool for times of peace, but unfortunately not adequate in a situation of war. This new theory served as justification for his support of German “national defence” in 1914. *Either/Or* includes a personal statement, a moving confession of her most cherished ethical and political values: “The international fraternity of the workers is for me the highest and the most sacred thing on earth, it is my guiding star, my ideal, my fatherland; I prefer to give up my life, than to become unfaithful to this ideal!”

Warning Against Nationalism

Rosa Luxemburg was prophetic in her warnings against the evils of imperialism, nationalism, and militarism. A prophet is not someone who miraculously predicts the future, but one who, like Amos and Isaiah, warns the people of the catastrophe that lies ahead—unless they take collective action to prevent it.

She warned that there would always be new wars as long as imperialism and capitalism continue to exist:

“World peace cannot be secured by such utopian or basically reactionary plans as international courts of arbitration composed of capitalist diplomats, diplomatic agreements concerning ‘disarmament’ ... ‘European federations’, ‘middle-European customs unions’, ‘national buffer states’ and the like. Imperialism, militarism and wars will not be abolished or damned as long as the rule of the capitalist classes continues uncontested.”

She warned against nationalism as a mortal enemy of workers and the socialist movement and as a breeding ground for militarism and war. “The immediate task of socialism”, she wrote in 1916, “shall be the intellectual liberation of the proletariat from the domination of the bourgeoisie as manifest in the influence of nationalistic ideology.”

In the *Fragment on War, the National Question and Revolution* (1918), she worries about the sudden rise of nationalist movements during the last year of the war. These movements were of very different nature, some being the expression of less developed bourgeois classes (like in the Balkans), while others, such as Italian nationalism, were purely imperial-colonial. This “present world-explosion of nationalism” contained a colourful variety of special interests, but was united by a common interest flowing from the exceptional historical situation created by October 1917: the struggle against the threat of the proletarian world-revolution.

What she meant by “nationalism” was not, of course, the national culture or the national identity of different peoples, but rather the ideology that turns “The Nation” into the supreme political value to which everything else must submit (“*Deutschland über alles*”).

Her warnings were prophetic, insofar as some of the worst crimes of the twentieth century—from the First to the Second World War and beyond—were committed in the name of nationalism, national hegemony, “national defence”, “national vital space”, and the like. One can criticise some of her positions in relation to national demands, but she clearly perceived the dangers of nation-state politics (territorial conflicts, “ethnic cleansing”, oppression of minorities).

Compass for a Globalised Left

What is the relevance of Rosa Luxemburg's internationalism today? Of course, historical conditions in the early twenty-first century are very different from those of the early twentieth, when she wrote most of her texts. Yet in some decisive aspects, her internationalist message is as—or perhaps even more—relevant today as in her time.

Rosa Luxemburg's legacy can be important for our movement in many respects. She makes clear that the enemy is not “globalisation” or just “neoliberalism”, but the global capitalist system itself. The alternative to global capitalist hegemony is not “national sovereignty”, the defence of the national against the global, but rather globalising, i.e. internationalising, resistance.

The alternative to the Empire is not a “regulated”, “humanised” form of capitalism, but a new, socialist and democratic world civilisation. Of course, in our times we have to deal with new challenges unknown to Rosa Luxemburg: ecological catastrophe and global warming. They result from the destructive dynamic of capitalists' unlimited urge for expansion and growth and must be confronted on a global scale. In other words, the ecological crisis is a new argument for the relevance of Luxemburg's internationalist ethos.

Rosa Luxemburg's warning against the poison of nationalism has never been so relevant. In the world today—and particularly in Europe and the United States—nationalism, xenophobia, and racism under various “patriotic”, reactionary, fascist, or semi-fascist guises are on the rise and constitute a mortal danger for democracy and freedom. Islamophobia, antisemitism, and anti-Roma racism are rampant, enjoying open or discrete government support.

Above all, xenophobic hatred of migrants—desperate populations fleeing persecution, war, and famine—is cynically promoted by neo-fascist parties and/or authoritarian governments. Orbán, Salvini, and Trump are only the most blatant and nauseating representatives of policies that scapegoat migrants—whether Muslim, African, or Mexican—and denounce them as a threat to national, racial, or religious identity. Thousands of migrants were condemned to death in the waters of the Mediterranean by the hermetic closure of Europe's borders. One can treat this as a new form of the brutal colonialist behaviour Rosa Luxemburg so harshly denounced.

Her socialist internationalism remains an invaluable moral and political compass in the midst of this xenophobic tempest. Fortunately, Marxist internationalists are not the only ones to stubbornly oppose the racist and nationalist wave: many people all around the world, moved by humanist, religious, or moral values, are demonstrating solidarity with persecuted minorities and migrants. Trade unionists, feminists, and other social movements are busy organising people of all races and nationalities in a common struggle against exploitation and oppression.

The internationalist ideas of Rosa Luxemburg are precious instruments to understand and *transform* our reality. They are necessary and indispensable weapons for the struggles of our times. Nevertheless, Marxism is an open method, constantly in movement, which must cultivate new ideas and concepts to confront the new challenges of each epoch.

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