

The Revolutionary Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg

Rosa Luxemburg is an icon of the socialist movement who died a martyr's death in 1919. But she was also a brilliant and highly original political thinker whose ideas about capitalism and how to oppose it are strikingly relevant to today's world.



The Rosa Luxemburg Memorial in Zwickau, Germany. (Jens K. Müller / Wikimedia Commons)

It's now been a century and a half since the birth of Rosa Luxemburg — the anniversary fell on March 5 this year. The great Polish-born revolutionary has been a reference point and an inspirational figure for generations of socialists. But some people might wonder if her key political ideas, developed in the early twentieth century, have stood the test of time.

Lea Ypi's answer to that question is an emphatic "yes." Lea is a professor of political theory at the London School of Economics. Her book *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History*, about the experience of growing up in Communist Albania, will be published this autumn, along with her study of Immanuel Kant.

This is an edited transcript from an episode of Jacobin's [Long Reads](#) podcast. You can

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Daniel Finn

How would you describe Rosa Luxemburg's contribution to Marxism and political theory?

Lea Ypi

One of her colleagues described Rosa Luxemburg as the most brilliant intellect of all the scientific heirs of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. She was certainly one of the most original and most influential thinkers in the history of Marxism, and one of the key figures of the socialist movement in the twentieth century. What makes her stand out is a combination of intellectual rigor with political integrity, and the ability, which is rare for Marxists, to merge deep theoretical insight with political vision. She was committed to knowledge and truth, but she was also committed to militant activism and to the pursuit of the workers' cause.

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Her contributions are among the most original in several areas of Marxist thinking, from debates around economic issues and the accumulation of capital to the critique of globalization in relation to colonialism and imperialism. The questions she addressed include national self-determination, the relationship between democracy and revolution, the challenges of parliamentarism and parliamentary reform, strikes and trade unions, political parties, and so on.

Luxemburg was an interesting and original Marxist whose fortune has, in a way, followed the intellectual and political fortunes of socialism in the twentieth century. She was heralded as one of the heroes of the working-class movement in the German Democratic Republic and the rest of Eastern Europe during the Communist period but marginalized and relatively forgotten in the “dark '90s,” when people thought that history had come an end.

There was no interest at that time in discussions of socialism that were theoretically rigorous or in the question of revolutionary transformation. In the past, she has been appropriated (and distorted) both by Western Marxists, working to chart alternative paths to those of state socialism, but also by socialist states that were attracted to her theory of capitalist crisis and her critique of social democracy.

More recently, Luxemburg's ideas have been rediscovered and gained new prominence. In the aftermath of the financial crisis and the current coronavirus crisis, and in the context of an ongoing electoral decline of traditional social democratic parties, her work has enjoyed a significant revival as a source of critique of global political economy. But it has also attracted interest as one of the most sophisticated Marxist attempts to think about the relationship between democracy and revolution, or about questions such as what socialist emancipation means beyond national boundaries and national democracy.

Daniel Finn

Luxemburg's most famous role as a political activist came in the framework of the German socialist movement in the years leading up to 1914 and after. But she was born in a very different context — that of the Polish territories ruled by the Tsarist empire. How important do you think that was for her later political development? Did it set her apart from the leading figures in the German movement?

Lea Ypi

It did set her apart. Luxemburg had a very unusual background. She was born, as you say, in Russian-occupied Poland, into a Jewish family. She joined a girls' secondary school in Warsaw, one of the leading elite schools, where she was radicalized and politicized. It was a school that was dominated by the children of Russian officials, where use of the Polish language was extremely limited. Places for children from Jewish families were even more limited.

One has to see her political development in view of the context where her ideas and her interest in political activity first began to emerge. Her first days of activism were in the Polish workers' movement, when she joined illegal revolutionary groups that were agitating against both capitalist oppression and despotic Russian rule. This was well-known by the time Luxemburg finished her secondary schooling. Her attitude towards the authorities was mentioned in various official school reports.

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It was also relatively well-known that, by this time, she had joined what was left of the first Polish socialist party. At that point, the party was in disarray because many of its leaders had been imprisoned and executed as a result of the repressive measures taken by the Russian authorities after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. This was the context in which her ideas began to mature.

Luxemburg was smuggled out of the country because she faced imminent arrest, and she emigrated to Zürich, Switzerland. She went to university there, and her doctoral dissertation was on the industrial development of Poland. Her doctoral supervisor, who was not a Marxist, said that Luxemburg had arrived from Poland as a fully formed Marxist already. After going to Switzerland to study, her work was characterized by a mixture of academic commitments, on the one hand — because she was writing her PhD — but also political engagement.

She was very young — just over twenty — when she became entangled in a fight with the main Polish socialist party, which was by then completely committed to a blend of progressive nationalism and Marxism. She was involved in pressing for the recognition of another party, the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (SDPK), by the Second International. The SDPK was a revolutionary but not necessarily nationalist Polish party. Her Polish background was fundamental to the development and emergence of her political views.

Daniel Finn

You touched on the fact that Rosa Luxemburg was very skeptical towards Polish nationalism and the idea that a Polish state could be restored to the European map. What was the theoretical rationale behind that position, and how did it measure up to later events?

Lea Ypi

This is one of the most interesting and trickiest aspects of Luxemburg's work. Her position on nationalism in Poland speaks to her stance on national self-determination more generally, which became very relevant later, at the time of her break with German Social Democracy (SPD) when World War I broke out.

To explain her initial position: Luxemburg was against national self-determination for Poland on what she thought were Marxist grounds, insisting on strict proletarian internationalism. This was very interesting because her reasons for being against Polish national self-determination did not reflect the dominant position among Marxists, including Marx himself. Marxists were traditionally open to progressive arguments for self-determination in general, and for the self-determination of Poland in particular. They believed that when self-determination struggles served an emancipatory purpose, they should be supported.

“Luxemburg held that national self-determination struggles could not serve emancipatory purposes if divorced from the question of proletarian revolution.”

Luxemburg's position was that national self-determination struggles could not serve emancipatory purposes if they were divorced from the question of proletarian revolution more generally. This speaks to her stance on proletarian revolution and the struggle of the labor movement, which she believed must take a wide, transnational form. She thought that there was a kind of mutual dependence between political and economic power, which, in the presence of globalization and the exploitation of particular marginalized areas — including Poland within the Russian Empire, for example — made her skeptical of theories of political emancipation through self-determination.

There is a widespread tendency among scholars to think that Luxemburg was against Polish national self-determination because she was not a nationalist. But for her, the question was different. She believed that if Poland was strong enough to become self-determining, to become independent from Russia, then surely it must also have the strength to extend and widen the proletarian struggle to include Russia itself. The main dilemma, therefore, was a question of how effective the labor movement could be, in as wide a scope as possible. Was national struggle in danger of paralyzing or restricting the proletarian struggle, or could it actually expand it?

Luxemburg thought that in the case of Poland, the problem of self-determination was a distraction from another more general demand, the one concerning the need to turn the whole Russian Empire into a socialist entity. To just focus on Poland risked playing the game of the Polish bourgeoisie, of serving political elites whose interests

might be wedded to the question of national self-determination, but without contributing to the emancipation of the working class more generally.

Was national self-determination in the end also going to be in the service of Polish workers? Luxemburg thought the Polish worker would go from being dominated by Russian capital to being dominated by emerging Polish capital. The issue for her was that national liberation movements ended up playing into the hands of liberal ruling elites and weakening the international workers' movement.

This position against national self-determination was one that she maintained throughout her life. It started with Poland because that was where her ideas emerged, and where her theoretical interests initially lay. It characterized her years of youth activism in the Polish revolutionary movement, but it also then expanded when she came into contact with German Social Democracy. She criticized German Social Democrats for failing to stand up to German imperial projects in Morocco, for example, because they were afraid of losing ground among the domestic public.

Her whole career was, in a way, shaped by this very original response to the national self-determination question. In 1915, she wrote in the *Junius Pamphlet* that so long as capitalist states existed, and so long as globalization and world politics determined the lives of nations, there was no national self-determination available, either in times of peace or in times of war.

Daniel Finn

When Eduard Bernstein came forward with the set of ideas known as “revisionism,” Luxemburg became his most implacable critic in the German Social Democratic movement. What were Bernstein's central ideas, and on what grounds did Luxemburg object to them?

Lea Ypi

Bernstein was a very eminent Marxist. He was known to Marx, and he was a friend and collaborator of Engels's, as well as his literary executor. He was a senior figure in the German Social Democratic Party. His theoretical positions on revisionism began to mature as the Prussian government started to progressively relax the anti-socialist laws that had been promoted by Bismarck. The Social Democratic movement continued to grow and faced the question of how far its demand for legal representation and political inclusion should go in parallel with the demand for revolutionary struggle and the overthrow of the existing order.

Bernstein started to contribute to this controversy with his book *The Preconditions of Socialism* in 1899, and later with various articles. He believed that he was arguing for reformism from Marxist principles. He said that Marxism was nothing but a kind of dialectical theory, which needed to adapt its theoretical analysis to changes in political circumstances.

He began by criticizing one of the fundamental tenets of Marxist economics, which was the tendency, as Marx put it, of the rate of profit to fall under the pressures of technological modernization, on the one hand, and increasing exploitation of the labor

force, on the other. Marx had said that these two pressures made it inevitable that the system would enter a fatal crisis. Bernstein thought that this was no longer the case — that the system showed a surprising capacity to adapt with which social democrats had to reckon.

Bernstein believed that this required Social Democrats to abandon revolutionary objectives in favor of enacting progressive legislation and trying to represent workers through parliamentary struggle. He insisted that this wasn't a subversion of the teachings of the founding fathers, but rather an effort to free Marxism from what he thought was a dialectical-materialist straitjacket.

Luxemburg was not the only one to protest Bernstein's reinterpretation of Marxism. His position was initially discussed and rejected at the Stuttgart Congress of the German Social Democratic Party. At a very young age, she gave this rejection a theoretically sophisticated shape, which other German Social Democrats hadn't been able to do up to that point. She emerged in the German Social Democratic movement as one of the sharpest critics of Bernstein, despite her status as a newcomer.

What made her intervention particularly interesting and sharp was what she said about the heart of the reform versus revolution dilemma. Bernstein had presented the choice between these as a tactical question of whether we should follow this or that method of struggle. For Luxemburg, on the other hand, it was about the very existence of the Social Democratic movement as a distinctive force in the struggle against capitalism, and in relation to liberal or democratic progressives who might also have been coming to terms with the limits of capital.

The question was essentially about whether democracy and capitalism were compatible. Bernstein suggested that they were, because of the ways in which both capitalism and democracy had transformed themselves in the years during which this debate was taking place. For Bernstein, capitalism had shown an incredible capacity to adapt. There were a number of developments with which Marxism had to reckon in the areas of trade, banking, the financial sector, the credit system, the rise of property owners, the emergence of cartels, and so on.

From a political perspective, Bernstein also believed that representative democracy had changed, and that those changes in a way already entailed the end of class struggle and class domination. He thought that, with the relaxation of the anti-socialist laws, the expansion of the SPD after the extension of the franchise, and the strengthening of workers' unions and cooperatives, all the Social Democratic parties across Western Europe were becoming more and more relevant as political forces. Bernstein argued that the Social Democratic movement could continue to develop, regardless of what he thought was the final goal.

When Luxemburg returned to Bernstein's dilemma of reform or revolution, she said that yes, it was possible that reform and revolution were compatible as methods of struggle, but Bernstein was neglecting the fact that democracy on the one hand and capitalism on the other weren't compatible. The reasons she gave for that had to do with the way the structure of globalization and the role of nation-states in a financialized economic system worked.

“Luxemburg argued that credit, rather than being a safety valve for the capitalist

system, contributes to its collapse.”

For example, Bernstein’s remarks on the development of the credit and debit system emphasized that there was now more money available to develop social projects. In response, Luxemburg argued that credit, rather than being a safety valve for the capitalist system, contributes to its collapse. She emphasized that financial capitalism and the availability of loans aggravated that crisis rather than providing a solution to it. It encouraged speculation and increased the asymmetries between the real economy and the speculative economy.

While credit might initially stimulate the development of the productive forces, it could no longer be helpful when it became a symptom of stagnation. That was Luxemburg’s economic response to Bernstein’s argument that capitalism had developed because of the availability of cartels and credit and the related impossibility of a tendency to crisis. She argued that Bernstein’s thinking about credit and what it offered to a financialized economy was very narrow.

On the other hand, Luxemburg insisted that what Bernstein saw as political inclusion and the possibility of responding to the pressures and tensions of a capitalist economy with the representation of workers was impossible. She believed that in a capitalist system, the representative system was itself at the mercy of capitalist pressures. It didn’t give the workers the ability to emancipate themselves or a voice in the political system. Rather, it turned the whole project into something that they would no longer recognize, losing sight of the goal of socialist transformation by turning it into a progressive vehicle of adaptation to the demands of liberal parliamentary democracy.

Daniel Finn

In Luxemburg’s time, socialists would refer to the question of gender equality as “the woman question,” which now sounds rather strange as a phrase. The German socialist leader August Bebel used that term in a very influential book called *Woman and Socialism*. Luxemburg, however, appears to have been quite resistant to being stereotyped or pigeonholed as an authority on the so-called woman question. She wrote about the same kind of political and economic questions as figures like Karl Kautsky or Rudolf Hilferding or Nikolai Bukharin. Would you say that’s a fair summary of her approach?

Lea Ypi

This is another interesting question that has troubled Luxemburg commentators for a long time, because it’s another dimension, like that of national self-determination, where her position is ambiguous and vulnerable to being distorted in various ways. It’s true that Luxemburg was skeptical of what she called bourgeois feminism, and it’s also true that she rejected calls from her colleagues in the Second International and German Social Democracy to be involved in “the woman question” in a way similar to, say, her close collaborator and friend Clara Zetkin.

On the other hand, her work has more recently been discovered and redescribed from

a feminist perspective, sometimes going too far to the other side: for example, by interpreting Luxemburg's entire theoretical and political work in the light of her gender, often also rereading her personal relationships — most prominently with her one-time partner Leo Jogiches — as being fundamental to the development of her ideas.

Luxemburg was interesting because she was not sold on feminism as a matter of pure political identity, when it was divorced from other concerns such as class, race, and imperialism. On the other hand, she was also not someone who would have stood aside and not been involved in the questions around women's emancipation. One good example was her response when the Belgian socialist leader, Emile Vandervelde, formed an electoral pact with the liberals. The alliance supported universal male suffrage but dropped the longstanding social democratic requirement to give women the vote.

“Luxemburg believed that the question of women's emancipation couldn't be divorced from the question of anti-capitalist struggle.”

Luxemburg said that this was a shameful move. She attacked Vandervelde's abandonment of this basic socialist principle, but also wrote more widely about how women's emancipation was crucial to the struggle against capitalism. It was one of these cases where she believed that the question of women's emancipation couldn't be divorced from the question of anti-capitalist struggle because, in large part, the plight of women depended on the way in which capital dominated and exploited them, in the workplace but also in the family. Her work has recently been reread and rediscovered in the light of a whole tradition of feminist writings that looked at such questions. Another very interesting dimension of her response was an article she published in 1914, which is not as well-known, called “Proletarian Woman.” She talked about women's resistance, not just in Europe, but also in Africa and Latin America. She wrote very movingly about the bones of Herero women bleaching in the sun, the women having been hunted down by German soldiers in Namibia. She wrote about the death cry, as she put it, of the martyred Indian women that was ignored by international capitalists, but also, to some extent, by those who limited the demand for women's emancipation to a very particular category of woman and a very particular context.

Daniel Finn

In works like *The Accumulation of Capital*, Luxemburg put forward a distinctive argument about the evolution of capitalism, based on the idea that it needed to expand into noncapitalist spaces, which would eventually run out. What was the significance of that argument?

Lea Ypi

Her book, which was written in 1913, developed her criticism of revisionism and combined it with an intervention into the core of Marx's analysis about the dynamic structure of capital accumulation. *The Accumulation of Capital* was basically a critical

study of the second volume of Marx's *Capital*. It was an effort to show how capitalism survives through its expansion into noncapitalist economies.

The book started with a critique of Marx, who Luxemburg thought had based the analysis of the process of capital and reproduction in *Capital's* second volume on assuming a closed system of accumulation — a market in which there were only capitalists and workers. Luxemburg criticized that argument as a theoretical obstruction that neglected the specific economic features of other parts of the world that hadn't caught up with capitalist development.

This was an interesting controversy, because at the time in which Luxemburg wrote, the writings that Marx had done on the non-European world — on colonialism and imperialism — were unknown to her. More recent Marxist analysis has shown that, in fact, Marx wasn't so blind to this world market in which there were whole noncapitalist areas that needed to catch up with capitalist development.

However, these writings of Marx were not available to Luxemburg at the time. She suggested that the closed-system analysis, which she had read in the second volume of *Capital*, made it very difficult to explain why and how capital can be reproduced and valorized when there is constant wage depression and growing income inequality, without also making arguments about the expansion of capital into other, noncapitalist parts of the world.

According to Luxemburg, the assumption of a closed capitalist system in which there were only workers and capitalists made it very difficult to explain what she thought was the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, between the unlimited expansive capacity of the productive forces on the one hand and the limits to social consumption on the other. She was one of the first Marxists to draw attention to the consumption side of the process of capital accumulation.

She explained the incentives of capitalist economic development by turning to what later economists called the relationship between the rate of savings and the rate of investment. Her theoretical work anticipates important insights of later figures such as John Maynard Keynes and Michał Kalecki.

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Marx had explained the reproduction of capital with reference only to the development of technology and competition among capitalists, but Luxemburg thought that this didn't really do justice to the fundamental contradiction and tendency towards crisis. That argument didn't take into account the necessity for capitalists to expand into new markets in order to sell consumption goods that domestic workers couldn't afford.

The idea was that workers within the core capitalist countries were so exploited that they couldn't buy the goods that capitalists had to sell. In the context of a depressed economy, which lacked sufficient demand for these goods, without this drive to expand into extra-European markets, there would be no outlet for accumulated capital. This is what gave rise to her critique of imperialism. Her core idea was that the expansion of capital into noncapitalist areas of the world — through conquest, through trade, through violence, and now, in our contemporary world, through loans and

subcontracts often signed with the help of deceptive means — provided this outlet and enabled the cheap mass production of goods that could not be sold in the markets of developed capitalist states because of the low levels of consumption. Of course, in doing so, these capitalist ventures created investment opportunities that displaced traditional ways of life and destroyed agricultural production, for example, or other noncapitalist systems of production.

There was a twin dynamic: On the one hand, the expansion of capital brought in technological innovations and modernized relations of authority in those places, but on the other hand, imperial conquest and war subjected entire parts of the world to the political control of the more developed capitalist countries. This is still relevant today, because one can think of international loans or systems of economic and political dependency that have placed the foreign and economic policies of capitalist states directly under the influence of these neocolonial (or at the time colonial) masters. “Luxemburg had a sensitivity to questions of race, ethnicity, and indigenous rights that was not characteristic of the Marxism of her time.”

The focus on the development of noncapitalist areas of the world gave Luxemburg this original insight into what goes on when we are trying to explain the contradictions of capital, and why it’s important not to limit our study to capital as it manifests itself in a particular nation-state or a bloc of nation-states. We need to think about it globally. It also gave her a sensitivity to questions of race, ethnicity, and indigenous rights that was not characteristic of the Marxism of her time.

Orthodox Marxists more or less shared the Enlightenment narrative whereby you had historical development through different stages: some of them were primitive, but then progressive modernization and social relations led first to agriculture, then commercial society, and then capitalist society as the height of modernization. But Luxemburg thought, for example, that models of common property were in many ways superior to those of commercial societies. She disrupted this stadial theory of historical progress that was found in Enlightenment thinking from Rousseau to Kant to Hegel, from which Marx had drawn inspiration, and which therefore had also in some ways shaped the debates of the Second International.

Daniel Finn

How did Luxemburg understand the relationship between capitalism and democracy over the long run? Did she anticipate any future for the system that Marxists referred to as “bourgeois democracy”?

Lea Ypi

Luxemburg never opposed representation in parliament or the fight for trade-union or democratic reforms as such. She opposed the divorcing of these struggles for reform from the struggle against capitalism as a system. When she wrote about women’s suffrage, for example, she was clearly very involved in campaigning for the enfranchisement of women and very keen on the demand for their representation in the process of political emancipation through reform.

But she believed that this process of emancipation had to be integrated into a more radical critique of capitalism. It was crucial to keep in mind the demand for access of the working class to political power. She believed that, if the working classes didn't have access to political power, or if that access became a question of compromise between different political elites — as it has ended up becoming historically, in a way that was already showing itself at the time she began to write on these questions — then the whole struggle would be devoid of content.

Luxemburg didn't think that reforms should be rejected, because she was very interested in the learning processes through which oppressed people would discover how to make decisions and prepare for the conquest of political power. But she always insisted that these reforms were, as she put it, trials of freedom — they weren't freedom themselves. These reforms shouldn't be set against the methods of revolution, but rather should be seen as complementary to them.

Luxemburg thought that, historically, the point of legal reform had been to consolidate emerging social classes after a particular revolution until the balance of forces was such that the whole juridical system could be dismantled in favor of a new system. For Luxemburg, this was what the terms “reform” and “revolution” meant. They weren't different ways of doing things. Rather, they denoted different juridical transformations.

The point was not to say, “Do I like reform, or do I like revolution?” as if one was better and one was worse — one more peaceful, and the other more violent. The point was rather to understand that a revolution brought about a different way of relating to political power. Luxemburg believed that access to political power was crucial. Legal reform and revolution had to be seen together in order to bring about this radical juridical transformation of political relations, property relations, and so on.

Demands for reform could be limited to tweaking capitalism here and there, raising taxes a little bit, or changing the distribution of opportunities to improve the conditions of workers in a particular country, a particular city, or a particular firm. Socialism, on the other hand, was a commitment to a completely different kind of society, with different theoretical principles. It was a project of economic and political emancipation, and it was a global project, not just a national one.

When Luxemburg criticized Bernstein, her main point of dissatisfaction was that Bernstein was committed to dismantling the very ideal of socialism as access to political power. This was what made her discussion around reform and revolution stand out. It's not a question of saying that Luxemburg is a revolutionary and not a reformist. It's rather a question of seeing what purpose reform should serve. When we think of capitalism as a global system, the point is to understand that reform is limited unless the system can be dismantled and reinvented so that the exploited have access to political power, and so that they can change juridical relations irreversibly.

Daniel Finn

How did Luxemburg respond to the war clouds that were gathering in European politics, and then to the outbreak of war itself in 1914?

Lea Ypi

1914 was the year in which Luxemburg broke for good with German Social Democracy. The rift had already started earlier. She had begun to be known as “Bloody Rosa” in the liberal press in the time between 1907 and 1914. Her political stance had started to evolve in a direction that was opposite to that of the German Social Democratic leadership — for example, when the Social Democrats were reluctant to condemn the imperialist ventures of Kaiser Wilhelm II in Morocco. She saw the reluctance of the SPD to come out clearly against imperialism because of the fear that they would lose votes and political representation. This made her aware of the dangers of nationalism for the labor movement, which claimed to be international. It also made her begin to worry, very early on, that the Social Democrats might support a war. She saw that there was a kind of growing militarism in society that her Social Democratic colleagues were increasingly reluctant to condemn. While the SPD’s parliamentary party was increasingly limited to debates around taxation and suffrage, Luxemburg began to advocate mass struggles and agitation for a republic where the workers would conquer political power. Her proposals to develop this kind of revolutionary struggle met with growing hostility before the war. When the war did break out in 1914, the SPD voted in favor of war credits. To her, this meant capitulating in the face of rising militarism and conservatism and embracing crude nationalism at the expense of the internationalist promise that the working classes would work together regardless of national boundaries.

“While the SPD was increasingly limited to debates around taxation and suffrage, Luxemburg advocated mass struggles and agitation for a republic where the workers would conquer political power.”

Luxemburg broke away from German Social Democracy and founded the Spartacus League, a group which agitated for an end to the war and concentrating on the proletarian struggle against capitalism on an international basis. She was imprisoned and wrote a pamphlet called *The Crisis of Social Democracy*, also known as the *Junius Pamphlet*, which was a synthesis of her critique of the limits of parliamentarism and the pursuit of compromise as an end in itself.

The pamphlet was also a synthesis of what it meant for social democracy as a revolutionary project to fail in its commitment to principled internationalism and limit itself to organization on a national basis. This, in turn, would bring a commitment to patriotism, participation in war, and the complete abandonment of the proletarian struggle.

Daniel Finn

Luxemburg’s critique of Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks is quite well-known, but mainly, perhaps, in the form of isolated fragments, rather than in a clear sense of the whole argument. What were the key points that she made?

Lea Ypi

I think it's important to avoid giving the impression of an isolated critique of Lenin and the Bolshevik project as such. We need to look at the criticisms that Rosa Luxemburg made of that project — and the support that she gave to it — by thinking about how she responded not just to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, but also to the first Russian revolution of 1905, which Lenin famously described as the dress rehearsal for the second revolution.

To understand the dilemmas that these revolutions presented to the international workers' movement, it's worth thinking about how the socialist movement as a whole looked at both 1905 and 1917. What Luxemburg had to say about the Bolshevik project is found in writings that came from both periods, and so can be constructed more coherently if we think about both together.

To start with the 1905 revolution: It found the socialist movement deeply divided. In Western Europe, there were socialist parties that were making electoral gains and were united in recognizing the authority of the International, while also being profoundly divided on matters of principle and tactics. In Russia, there was no direct equivalent to the debate on reform versus revolution because the socialists all had to work underground and at great risk to themselves. They were divided on questions of membership and party organization.

There was no question in 1905 of legal recognition of the workers' movement, parliamentary struggle, or compromise with the ruling elite. These were all luxuries of the German Social Democrats that the Russians didn't have. What you had was a revolution that broke out after decades of exploitation, impoverishment, and authoritarian violence. The 1905 revolution wasn't a single revolution so much as the sum of a number of events: mass strikes, border unrest, mass demonstrations, and so on.

In this period, Luxemburg was obviously very interested in the Russian revolution and followed the events very closely. She published several interventions in which she debated with Lenin on the role of the masses and the party in revolutionary circumstances. As a result of those debates with Lenin, she also tried to persuade her colleagues in the SPD to adopt the mass strike as a political weapon to advance the cause of workers in Germany.

She smuggled herself into the Russian part of Poland and tried to reach Warsaw. She was arrested again and imprisoned, after a personal journey which sought to connect the struggles of Polish, German, and Russian workers. One of her most famous pamphlets, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions*, was the result of her analysis of these events. Luxemburg came to Germany with these lessons from the Russian revolution and spoke to the party congress in 1905 about the gains that the Russians had made and what could be learned from Russian Social Democracy.

August Bebel, one of the party founders, joked, as he was listening to her speech, that there was so much talk of blood and revolution that he kept looking at his shoes to see if they weren't already full of blood. This was the reputation that she developed for her commitment to the 1905 revolution and her reflections on what could be learned from this revolutionary underground movement that had developed in circumstances very different from those of German Social Democracy. In a way, her position as

someone who was originally from Poland explains her outsider stance on these questions: She could see better than others that circumstances in Russia were very different from those in Germany and called for a different approach.

Luxemburg reflected on the 1917 revolution in another essay entitled “The Russian Revolution,” which is often considered the synthesis of her thoughts on the topic. It was published after her death and was in fact a defense of the October Revolution. Written while she was in prison, Luxemburg’s essay praises the Bolshevik Revolution as a sign of the possibility of a proletarian revolutionary struggle, even under deeply oppressive circumstances. At the same time as she was praising the Bolsheviks, she drew attention to what she considered to be some of the limitations of the movement and the ways in which they were reflected in the relationship between party elites and the masses of the oppressed.

On the one hand, she criticized some of the policies that the Bolsheviks had implemented when they came to power: granting land to peasants, for example, or their continued insistence on the right to national self-determination. On the other hand, she also criticized the suppression of what she thought was revolutionary democracy. She drew attention to party bureaucratization and to some of the measures that had been taken to limit freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of association. She believed that the Bolsheviks were beginning to divorce socialism and democracy in a way that was extremely dangerous and that concentrated power in the hands of a few members of the party elite.

“Luxemburg believed that the Bolsheviks were beginning to divorce socialism and democracy in a way that was extremely dangerous.”

This context was where her most critical remarks on the Russian Revolution came up, talking about the risks of suppressing dissent and the dangers of censorship. She talked about what this entailed for the revolutionary movement as a whole. Most perceptively, she raised the question of what would happen when the revolution was brought about in this way, and how it risked concentrating power in a class of party bureaucrats who would no longer be connected to the masses and their struggle, and who were beginning to develop their own interests and consolidate power in ways that were deeply problematic. This is also the context in which one of her most famous sentences, “Freedom is always the freedom of those who think differently,” should be read.

What made this critique particularly interesting was that she was extremely insightful in seeing what happens to a revolution when its leaders, the vanguard, become progressively alienated and divorced from the demands of the masses, and from a process of revolutionary struggle, which was itself a learning process in which the masses could learn how to govern only by participating in the struggle and creating institutions that could represent them.

Luxemburg, however, was also extremely hostile to the efforts of the German Social Democrats to show that the Bolshevik Revolution should never have happened, and that the proletariat should never have come to power in a revolutionary way because the method of the SPD was the right one. She was skeptical of the arguments advanced by people like Karl Kautsky and others, who said that Russia was not ripe

for a revolution.

She stressed that she was in favor of this revolutionary effort and the process of involving the masses in it. In explaining why, Luxemburg insisted that it was important for the revolutionaries in Russia to exercise a “dictatorship.” However, as she put it, this would not be the dictatorship of a party or of a small clique, but rather the dictatorship of the whole working classes, which would happen with the active participation of the popular masses and in a democratic way.

Again, this is one of those things that might at first sight seem like a contradiction — how could a dictatorship also be democratic? — but if one thinks about the role of the masses and the way in which Rosa Luxemburg reflected on political emancipation, it makes sense. It makes sense when one thinks of democratic dictatorship as a kind of emergency measure that would be truly representative of the oppressed people and not centrally controlled by one party.

Daniel Finn

What do you think Luxemburg still has to offer us as a thinker, when set against the ideas that are prevalent today in political theory and political philosophy?

Lea Ypi

I think Luxemburg is an extremely important thinker whose ideas should be taken seriously, in part, because she contributes to a Marxist tradition that is deeply concerned about freedom. What animates her entire body of work is this question: Under what conditions can freedom be fully realized, and how we should think about freedom, in normal circumstances but also in circumstances of crisis, transition, and revolution, when certain tendencies risk undermining the initial emancipatory goals of the class of oppressed people?

There are different strands to her thought that all come together. Her writings are scattered, so we don't have an organic body of writing: We have books, pamphlets, articles, and letters. But there are four dimensions. First, there is the question of economic exploitation by capital that is global in form and needs to reckon with the pressures of globalization, with the limitations of its own expansion, and with the tools available to counter its exploitative tendencies.

The second dimension is the question of political organization: how to bring together reform and revolution, how to think about using both methods, depending on the circumstances, without losing sight of the final goal, as traditional Social Democrats have done. Here, her thinking is valuable because it urges us not to think in abstract dichotomies but to tailor the method of struggle to the context at hand, and to reflect on democracy not as an institutional reality that is already there, but rather as an ideal that should be realized.

“What animates Luxemburg's entire body of work is this question: Under what conditions can freedom be fully realized?”

The third dimension is that of organization: how to think about the relationship between the party and the social movement, in the moment of revolutionary struggle

but also when a party that genuinely represents the working classes is in power. Here it is crucial to think about how the way in which a political group conducts itself in the phase of revolutionary struggle affects what kind of ruling group it becomes, and how to ensure that the spontaneity and dynamism reflected during the revolution are retained and can remain self-correcting also when the revolutionaries are in power. Finally, there is the question of how to think about oppression in a way that is genuinely intersectional, as we would now say, bringing together the concerns of gender-based oppression, race-based oppression, and class-based oppression in a critique of the capitalist system as a whole — one that is also global and takes into account these differentiated struggles in different parts of the globe. Luxemburg really set an example for how to think about these different questions in a way that doesn't set them against each other, but rather helps us develop a coherent alternative to the status quo.