

What Can We Learn From Rosa Luxemburg?

A century ago today, Rosa Luxemburg was murdered by the German Freikorps, her body dumped in Berlin's Landwehr canal. The old imperial order was collapsing, and Luxemburg, along with Karl Liebknecht, murdered alongside her, had participated in the great uprising of ordinary Germans who finally insisted, simply, on no longer dying – and as part of the nascent Communist party, had joined the struggle to bring down the last defenders of the old order.

Luxemburg's murder has entered into socialist martyrology: her friend and comrade Paul Levi claimed it marked the departure of the great train of death Nazism would eventually run across the continent. Others, rightly, see it as the culmination of the Social Democratic Party of Germany's (SPD) betrayals throughout the war. Socialist historians wonder about counterfactuals – had the German revolution not failed, had she lived, would Stalinisation have taken hold so deadeningly and effectively throughout the European left?

So heart-rending is the story of her murder that her life and thought can seem like footnotes – resurrected only as caricatures by those who want to relitigate long-dead disputes of a vanished world, or who wish to preserve her life in aspic. But Luxemburg's thought on democracy, war, imperialism – and, especially, her manner of thinking – still has much to teach us.

Party and movement.

After her 1898 move to Berlin, Luxemburg was part of a genuinely mass party: the SPD embraced a great swathe of the German working class, with its own institutions and culture, a powerful force in political life which had fought for that position from the maw of persecution and repression under Otto von Bismarck. All such large political groupings necessarily contain a diverse and sometimes contradictory set of views; Luxemburg was firmly and forcefully on German Social Democracy's left wing.

She was unafraid to quarrel with 'great men' – either in the party's leadership, or in socialism's theoretical canon. Most famously she took to task the leaders of the SPD in *Social Reform or Revolution?*, a pamphlet directed against the leadership's increasingly quiescent approach to capitalist social order. Like many great works, its punchy title lent itself to later caricature, and its arid binary isn't always a useful way to think about practical politics. Luxemburg supported the limited reforms that might alleviate misery, expand the franchise, or better distribute wealth: her point, however, was that there was a limit beyond which such reforms could not pass. She trained a cold eye on claims that domestic reforms to capitalism and advances in technology and credit pointed to a newly stable system, out of which socialism might emerge on an 'evolutionary' basis without any sharp break from the preceding regime. Such scepticism remains useful today.

But there was another, more important, aspect to Luxemburg's thinking about the SPD. German Social Democracy was ambivalent about the state and the party's role within it. With the leadership's eyes fixed on its manoeuvring within the Reichstag, it was only too natural that they should seek to mollify some of the party's sharper criticism of capitalism and imperialism. But Luxemburg perceived this as an outgrowth of a basic category error: confusion of the growth of the party – in membership numbers, and in seats – with the growth of the movement toward socialism itself. For many in the SPD's leadership, the two were one and the same; Luxemburg saw, rightly, that they were not.

This is not merely an academic or historical question, though the role of the SPD throughout the war, and in propping up the state after Kaiser Wilhelm's abdication – declaring Germany not yet ready for a republic – now makes such a difference seem obvious in retrospect. Luxemburg saw it far earlier, when it was far harder to do so. It is a salutary reminder to

leftists within political parties – Britain’s Labour party included – that however linked party and movement are, however taxing the moment’s political exigencies, criticism and careful attention to principle are necessary safeguards against subduction into a procedural shell game.

‘Freedom for the one who thinks differently.’

Any appreciation of Rosa Luxemburg ought to highlight her anticipation of today’s left’s concerns: her early appreciation of the violence of colonialism and its inseparability from capitalism’s foundations, which crystallised in her major economic work; her refusal to live conventionally and insistence on emancipation, joined to a contempt for bourgeois feminism; her antipathy to nationalism and chauvinism of all stripes, including on the left; her deep appreciation of the natural world and fascination with non-capitalist societies, and what they might teach modern socialists. But above all, for me, she spoke the words ‘socialism’ and ‘freedom’ in equal measure – and that is one of her greatest gifts to us.

Her arguments within the SPD, and with Vladimir Lenin over a decade before 1917, are important in forming the backdrop of her later writing on the Russian revolutions, and her own participation in the German uprising of 1918. In the aftermath of the first Russian revolution in 1905 in Warsaw, she saw not only the sudden transformation wrought by revolution, but, as she suggested in a letter to Luise Kautsky at the time, how easily things return to their old forms, how fragile the ‘new’ can be. It was this attention to the question of how to sustain a revolution – how a new society might properly transform itself out of the manacles of the old order – which lends her work a still vital quality.

That question is most fully put in her writing on the Russian Revolution. The 1917 revolution erupted like a red flare in the east; Luxemburg saw it from the grated window of her cell, imprisoned for anti-war agitation. Her writing on the Russian Revolution is therefore all the more remarkable for refusing the role of Bolshevik spin doctor, given the sheer slaughter of war around her. Though the work has occasionally been used by conservatives to denigrate Lenin, and was seized on as evidence of deviation during Stalinism, it was in fact a socialist defence of the Russian Revolution, written from a deep familiarity with the Bolshevik protagonists and from the mind of a committed revolutionary. Luxemburg had identified that Lenin and Trotsky’s subtle and powerful intelligence could easily claim necessity as virtue – and that this habit might endanger the revolution itself, by cutting it off from the very roots that nourished it. In a justly famous passage, she wrote:

“Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party – however numerous they may be – is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently. Not because of any fanatical concept of “justice” but because all that is instructive, wholesome and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic, and its effectiveness vanishes when “freedom” becomes a special privilege.

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. Public life gradually falls asleep, a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule.”

The passage above rings with Luxemburg’s rhetorical mastery, and her fine-grained attention to the problem of politics. Her chosen metaphors are sometimes drawn from the treasure-house of biblical and classical stories, but far more often from the natural world. For her, political problems can often be described in terms of seething, unbounded natural life against the choking forces of oppression, alienation and exploitation. On a similar basis of embodied political imagination that she declares her solidarity with the ‘victims on the rubber plantations of Putumayo, the blacks in Africa with whose corpses the Europeans play catch’.

This appreciation of the unnatural deformations of capitalism and oppression runs like a pulsing artery through her work.

It is sometimes claimed that her impassioned defence of socialist democracy runs aground on the rocks of political practice; it is certainly true that nowhere does she give universal prescriptions or programmes. Often, as in Marx's journalism rather than his theoretical work, she is attentive to the particulars of the situation, the mediations and particularities of conflicts, as she tries to weld them to great principles, sometimes approaching a socialist ethics of participation. What Luxemburg teaches us is not a doctrine – 'Luxemburgism' would have been preposterous to her – but an open set of penetrating questions about political practice, the relation of means and ends, how transformation may be made to endure. Her remarkable anticipation of the problems encountered by the Soviet state deserves its place in the history books. But we should not make of Luxemburg a mere Cassandra wailing at the walls of Troy. She understood equally that the protection of the revolution in Russia also required the working class in Germany – and internationally – to rally to its aid. That conviction animated her work right up until her death.

Socialism or barbarism.

Luxemburg saw the SPD's vote for war credits and promise of social truce for the duration of the war as not only a catastrophe for the German working class, who would be sent to die in countless, pointless thousands, but a wider international disaster for socialist parties across the nations. It represented the immolation of Social Democracy's vaunted ideals on the altar of nationalism. Freed from her prison cell after the sailors' mutiny precipitated the collapse of the Kaiser's government, she threw herself into agitation. She saw that the great majority of the German working class, suffering after years of slaughter, were no longer satisfied with the gulf between the SPD's high words and low deeds.

In her pamphlets smuggled out of prison, Luxemburg had pointed to the old socialist slogan 'socialism or barbarism' as an encapsulation of capitalism's continent-wide bloodletting, and of the choice that faced humanity. After her release, she took up the slogan again, this time as a watchword to ensure no such war – irretrievably linked, she believed, to imperialist expansion as part of the logic of capitalism – could ever be repeated:

“Only in such a [socialist] society are national hatred and servitude uprooted. Only when such a society has become reality will the earth no more be stained by murder. Only then can it be said: This war was the last.

In this hour, socialism is the only salvation for humanity. The words of the Communist Manifesto flare like a fiery menetekel above the crumbling bastions of capitalist society: socialism or barbarism!”

Her writing and thinking from this period – much of which is only relatively recently available in English – is some of her most exciting. A reader can see her moving and thinking with the revolution. It is likely she considered the final uprising against the Ebert-Scheidemann government premature – writing that the left in Germany could not take power save by the 'clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian mass'. She knew the balance of forces was not with them; that the workers' councils were hesitant. But revolutions, as she had written, do not stand still. They outgrow themselves. She joined the masses where they were, in the street.

The government crushed the nascent insurgency. The Freikorps murdered her, along with dozens of others in summary executions. Yet in the last article she wrote, with the revolution crumbling around her, she channels the voice of the revolution itself, declaring: “Tomorrow the revolution will “rise up again, clashing its weapons,” and to your horror it will proclaim with trumpets blazing: I was, I am, I shall be!”

A political life.

It is, finally, impossible to separate Rosa Luxemburg the woman, the theorist, the political activist – the life from the theory. For her, politics was indissolubly linked to life. Were she to cast her unflinching and steady eye around today's world, I don't doubt she would see much amiss: I suspect she would castigate nominally left-wing charlatans nestling close and playing see-no-evil with nationalists and border guards, and heap scorn on those marching arm-in-arm with avowed neoliberals in an etiolated parody of internationalism. She would rage at the ravaging of the rainforests and poisoning of the oceans, the great waste and destruction of globalised capitalism – which she foresaw so clearly – and the nihilism of those who accept the lack of alternatives. She would tell us never to forget that the conflict of capital with labour lies at the heart of our society's sickness. She would remind us with sharpened tongue that silent treason is not enough, and that change comes through struggle, not mere hope. She would counsel us against despair, the sapping poison of social movements. She would look at the failure of the centre and the jackals of the far right and remind us no other slogan is better fitted for our banners than this: socialism or barbarism!