

Rosa Lives

The revolutionary thought of Rosa Luxemburg continues to inform and inspire anticapitalist movements today.

by Paul Buhle & Alec Hudson



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osa Luxemburg is an anomaly for the Marxist left. A revolutionary leader whose thought has been embraced by Marxist-Leninists, anarchists, and even anticomunist social democrats, her influence on political thought has increased in the era after the Cold War. Born in Zamość to a middle-class Jewish family, she rose through the ranks of the burgeoning social-democratic movement in Germany.

After witnessing the 1905–7 revolutionary upheavals in

the Russian Empire (which Poland was a part of at the time), she developed a staunchly anti-parliamentarian view of socialism, arguing that only through mass revolutionary democratic self-organization of the working class could capitalism be transcended.

Her revolutionary anti-parliamentarian views led not only to her leaving the German Social Democratic Party to help found the Spartacist League, but to her murder at the hands of right-wing paramilitaries working in the service of the elected Social Democratic government in January 1919.

In death Luxemburg came to be one of the most iconic and revered figures of the European left, a revolutionary whose thought was ahead of her time and which continues to drive movements to abolish capitalism.

The new graphic biography *Red Rosa*, written by Kate Evans and edited by Paul Buhle, explores how Luxemburg developed her revolutionary ideals at the same time she struggled against a German Social Democratic Party leadership dismissive of her revolutionary zeal and rejection of the parliamentary path to socialism.

Chicago-based activist Alec Hudson spoke with Buhle for *Jacobin* to get a sense of Luxemburg's background, how her work has spread around the globe, and why she remains one of the most important Marxists of the twentieth century.

Though Luxemburg is remembered by many today as a revolutionary Marxist, she spent the majority of

her political life in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). What was the ideological makeup of the SPD, how did the party turn toward a more reformist ideology that Luxemburg rejected, and why did it vote to support the war in 1914?

The SPD, the historic party of socialism, was by wartime in 1914 the largest party in the German parliament and also the largest left party in the world. More or less steady electoral success since legalization lent a sense of inevitability and also a deep anxiety about rocking the boat for any reason, although success was considered more or less assured — in the long run.

Talk of revolution by any means but patient education and elections was considered dangerous. For socialists to vote against war credits would truly rock the boat, something almost unthinkable — even for those who had been on the record adamantly opposing war.

In *Red Rosa*, a lot of attention is paid to how Luxemburg developed her concept of the revolutionary mass strike by witnessing the striking workers in Warsaw in the aftermath of the revolutionary wave

of 1905–7. How did this work and line of thinking differentiate her from other social-democratic thinkers of the time?

My old mentor (and author of *The Black Jacobins*) C. L. R. James, sought to make one point, above all, very clear. The revolution could only come from the bottom and would draw upon the energies of the lowest of the low, the mass worker. He also insisted, with Lenin, that the existing state could not bring socialism. On the contrary, it needed to be replaced.

The wave of European mass strikes, 1905–7, persuaded Rosa Luxemburg to look at the whole revolutionary process anew, and in this sense she is said to have continued Marx's view of social transformation as a matter of working-class dynamics rather than narrow vote success or union membership. She very much anticipated Lenin's threat to embrace the Soviets of 1917 over the Bolshevik party, if necessary.

In *Red Rosa*, Evans particularly emphasizes the importance of Luxemburg's 1913 work The Accumulation of Capital, which she says foreshadowed globalization by analyzing economic power in an imperialistic political system. Why was this analysis so unique for the

time?

The idea of “national oppression” was practically forbidden within the Second International, even as rebellions of one kind or another within the colonies continued to unfold. Rosa did not grasp the “national question” or, rather, swatted at it, but she had a burning insight into the sources of increasing conflict.

Along with a small handful of others, precious few of them theorists of any kind, Rosa worked out in Marxist terms the implications of capital’s expansion to the very ends of the (colonialized) earth. As Kate Evans properly explains but studious readers will find at great length in the newly translated *Accumulation of Capital*, Rosa’s most formidable economic analysis argued that capitalism was not bound for hopeless crisis as so many contemporary Marxists predicted.

Rather, if unchallenged or insufficiently challenged, it would certainly proceed to wreck havoc across the breadth of the planet, programming “underdevelopment” through ravaging of natural resources, transforming existing ecology into marketable venues, and utterly crushing populations in the process. Just as we see so clearly now.

Second International socialist leaders, expecting industry and a proletariat to arise eventually in the outlands, did not grasp this narrative and, with their outlook, perhaps could not conceptually grasp it without giving up too much of their own worldview.

Lenin, as well as some of the erstwhile disciples of American socialist Daniel DeLeon — the Curacao-born Sephardic Jew who had briefly taught anti-imperialist Latin American history at Columbia during the 1880s —

grasped at a wider view, supporting uprisings vigorously. So did a small group of Dutch socialists, influenced by the behavior of the Dutch colonizers but influenced also by their own heterodox anarcho-socialist views.

It is intriguing, on the 2016 centenary of Ireland's Easter Rising, that near-time martyr James Connolly had himself worked out, in his *Labour in Irish History* (1910) a theory of "backwardness" for the Irish economy, culture, and working class, without any formal training. The idea of what would someday be called "underdevelopment" was in the air, but not well seen. The collapse of the Second International, the shift of attention to the stirrings of the colonial world, made new insights almost inevitable. Let me add that in my own generational youth, the 1960s, not only conservatives and liberals but Cold War-oriented social democrats from Europe to the US continued to uphold Second International views. They remained stubbornly sentimental toward the legacies of colonialism as they denounced, at least until 1970, any US withdrawal from Vietnam.

Luxemburg famously critiqued Eduard Bernstein's reformist tract Evolutionary Socialism in her work Reform or Revolution, which put forth the classic Marxist notion of rejecting an evolution to socialism through electoral politics. However,

recently socialist theorist Erik Olin Wright has argued that alternatives to capitalism are more varied than simply reforming and overthrowing capitalism, including the idea of eroding capitalism with new institutions. Are these truly new tactics for anticapitalists, or are they simply continuations of the reformist mode?

Let me answer this in a certain way, related to the radical urban history of Madison, Wisconsin, where Professor Wright and I both call home. The 1970s found thousands of activists here, as the movement wound down with the close of the Vietnam War. They organized cooperatives by the dozens, enrolled thousands (especially in the food co-ops), and preached the gospel of trying to live in a different way while awaiting a larger social change.

By 1980, however, the power of capital swept away a left-wing city hall and also the daily, worker-managed newspaper created by strikers a couple of years earlier. A strong mood of reform remained in the city, but it had been effectively domesticated by the limitations of the economic counter-culture and the arrival of Reaganism. Efforts of various kinds to chip away at corporate control, revived by the mass “Wisconsin Uprising” movement of 2011, are valuable and remain important.

Do they actually confront capital? Not much.

Luxemburg has become an international figure for the anticapitalist left, but her influence spread globally even through nations occupied by imperial powers, notably Ceylon (before it became Sri Lanka). How was it that she, as a European theorist, became recognized as a major global figure in the Marxist canon?

First, Ceylon was a bit of a fluke. Trotskyists played an important role in the struggle for national liberation, something unusual if by no means unknown in the Third World, over the generations prior to independence. Otherwise, the impact of Rosa arguably became greater after national independence had been achieved and, across the globe, the limitations of old-style socialist and communist projects become more obvious. I note in the afterword to *Red Rosa* that the political “mass strikes” in South Africa of the 1980s prompted some of the Left to read her relevant work closely, but the influence of the South African Communist Party was such that only after power-sharing and the fall of the East Bloc did longtime Communist leader Joe Slovo begin to speak about the importance of Rosa’s contribution. The limits of the party and the old-style Communist vision of “stages” had become clear.

It is problematic to speak broadly of worldwide movements, but in my experience, students during the 1960s–80s, more than workers organizations or members of particular left parties, brought Rosa into a broader understanding of socialism's history and her continuing importance. Occupy and associated movements have seemed to bring her work closer to public attention once more. Interest continues to grow, with the anti-austerity movements in the lead.

How has the legacy of Luxemburg been able to evolve to be claimed by people and groups on the Left from social democrats to communists to anarchists?

As suggested in the afterword to *Red Rosa*, her legacy was fought over in Germany during the 1920s, only to be discarded, at the command of Stalin, in 1931.

Thereafter, it tended to become the special province of Trotskyism, whose leaders looked upon rival claims (mainly by left socialists and anarchists) with resentful possessiveness. Credit must be given to Trotskyists, however, for keeping her pamphlets circulating.

Oddly, in the 1960s, a circle of Cold War social democrats claimed *Marxism vs Leninism* as a totemic anticommunist text and, not so indirectly, a defense of their own support of the Vietnam War. This cynical gesture mirrored the East German claims upon Rosa, with arrests of demonstrators during the annual January remembrances (of Rosa and Karl Liebknecht's assassinations) for anyone holding up unapproved

posters.

A deeper interpretation is needed for the complexity of the longstanding, German Social Democratic Party's youth movement adoption of Rosa as saint. But it is surely the Left Party and the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung of today that have the proper credentials to claim her for their own (not that they wish to monopolize her memory or her meaning for themselves).

What do you think she would make of the current state of the American left and the tasks for socialists and their organizations?

The near-century since Rosa's death has seen so much changed, the sense of certainty for a future socialism so diminished by ecological crisis, that it probably does us no good to imagine that, for instance, she would have viewed Bernie Sanders or even Jeremy Corbyn as weak tea, their movements as far too timid and accepting of capitalism. On the other hand, Rosa believed in mass organizations and doubtless had little taste for divisive sectarian gestures.

Socialist feminism? The ideals would have appealed, the idea of anything like a separate movement, probably not. And so on. Her faith in the working class of the West might have been shaken as her hopes for the peoples of the former colonies enhanced.

I like to think that, in my lifetime, C. L. R. James best updated Rosa, even when he did not quite grasp that he was doing so. Like the analogies of Rosa's ideas and the vision of the Industrial Workers of the World, this is,

probably, the subject for another time.