

**ЛЕВАЯ АЛЬТЕРНАТИВА В XX ВЕКЕ:
ДРАМА ИДЕЙ И СУДЬБЫ ЛЮДЕЙ.
К 100-ЛЕТИЮ КОМИНТЕРНА**

**THE LEFT ALTERNATIVE IN THE 20th CENTURY:
DRAMA OF IDEAS AND PERSONAL STORIES.
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ROSA LUXEMBURG'S SYMPHONY ON THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

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The Prehistory

Let us go back to the summer of 1918. Rosa Luxemburg was moved to the prison in Wrocław one year before. She has to put up with fresh maltreatment. Her health is ruined. One of her closest friends, Hans Diefenbach, falls at the front. The world is in commotion, in the East more than anywhere else, but she remains imprisoned. In Germany, resistance against the war is growing but there is no mass refusal to obey orders yet, and no councils and no revolution yet either. In Russia, her closest political allies, the Bolsheviks, have taken power and are struggling to impose socialism. Nevertheless, if we look at the articles written by Rosa Luxemburg at this time, the socialism she so yearned for appears to be distorting the ideals she is committed to. She deeply fears a new disappointment.

In this situation she does something utterly impossible. She circumvents the logic of *us or them* and so doing both appraises and criticises the Bolsheviks. She criticises them for not doing enough to abolish the roots of capitalism, hatred between peoples and war because the Bolsheviks gave land to the peasants, enabled subjugated peoples to gain independence as nations and signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Germans. Thereby, Rosa Luxemburg writes, they chose paths that did not *directly* lead to socialism and even took paths that could potentially discredit socialism. Harsher still is her criticism of the Bolsheviks' transition to dictatorship. A jotted note like a wild shoot on the side of her manuscript still resonates today: '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.' (Luxemburg 2004a,

305). She may have taken the term ‘one who thinks differently’ from a collection of essays by Russian writer Maxim Gorky that appeared in 1918 (Gorki 1918, 21).

Some say one ought not reduce Rosa Luxemburg to the sentence ‘freedom for the one who thinks differently’. Reducing a thinker and politician like Rosa Luxemburg who has left such a large and complex compilation of texts to a single sentence is either banal, or an attempt to remove the power from this sentence as if it had been purely ornamental, as if it had escaped Rosa Luxemburg accidentally in the heat of a polemic. Notwithstanding, she sees in the abolishment of democracy a disastrous instrument of Bolshevik policy and writes: ‘for it stops up the very living source from which alone can come the correction of all the innate shortcomings of social institutions. That source is the active, untrammelled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people’ (Luxemburg 2004a, 302).

In the discussion of this note both ‘friends and foes’ often forget that Rosa Luxemburg did not simply criticise the Bolsheviks as undemocratic but also as not socialist. For reasons I will describe later in her view the two critiques are inseparable. To her it is unthinkable to first suspend democracy, then build the house of socialism and at a later point give the house’s inhabitants the opportunity to discuss the fundamentals. In her understanding socialism and democracy are intrinsically related.

Luxemburg had followed the debates about the Russian revolution in Germany very closely (this discussion is documented in Schütrumpf 2017) and began to intervene more and more critically. The trigger for Luxemburg’s manuscript *The Russian Revolution* was a footnote by Ernst Meyer after Leo Jogiches, the editor of the *Spartacus Letters*, was detained. In this footnote the author carefully but nonetheless clearly distances himself from Luxemburg’s criticism of the Bolsheviks. The manuscript *The Russian Revolution* from early autumn 1918 is an incomplete but nonetheless clearly structured and therefore nearly complete manuscript. The following analysis of this manuscript will not be to pick out individual arguments and contrast them with positions held by Lenin or Trotsky on the one side and Kautsky as their often quoted antipode on the other. What I aim for is a reconstruction of the context Rosa Luxemburg creates in the text. To this end, I will treat this small but very powerful work in its entirety. I will look at it as if it were a symphony, with its classical four movements, composed as much through logic as by passion. My focus is not on the historic or current truths of Luxemburg’s statements. I am more interested in the direction she was taking – in what Rosa Luxemburg wanted to say and not what was caused by what she said.

The manuscript *The Russian Revolution* begins and ends with an appraisal of the Russian revolution and the Bolsheviks. These are sections I and II and the final part – they can be interpreted as the first long and the

short fourth movement of her 'symphony'. The first massive movement is like a beating drum presenting the theme: 'The Russian Revolution is the mightiest event of the World War' (Luxemburg 2004a, 281). This theme is repeated numerous times. The appraisal of the role the Bolsheviks played in the revolution leads to the main theme: the Bolsheviks, she states, were the ones who understood that in Russia, as much as in Europe, socialism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, was the order of the day. With their demand of all power to the Soviets, they had given the 'watch-words for driving the revolution ahead' and drawn 'all the necessary conclusions' (Luxemburg 2004a, 289). They had shown the truth of the motto 'not through a majority, but through revolutionary tactics to a majority – that's the way the road runs' (Luxemburg 2004a, 289). As Rosa Luxemburg writes the Bolsheviks had thereby 'won for themselves the imperishable historic distinction of having for the first time proclaimed the final aim of socialism as the direct program of practical politics' (Luxemburg 2004a, 290).

The manuscript ends with an appraisal of the Bolsheviks stating that they had managed to go beyond 'questions of tactics' and instead focused on 'the most important problem of socialism': 'the capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such' (Luxemburg 2004a, 310). Luxemburg ends her manuscript with the sentence: 'And in *this* sense, the future everywhere belongs to "Bolshevism"' (Luxemburg 2004a, 310). One could also read this final sentence as: 'It is *only* in this sense, that the future everywhere belongs to "Bolshevism"'. The beat of the drum has become a fortepiano, played loudly at first, and ending much more quietly.

It is worth thinking about why Rosa Luxemburg did not focus on the seizure of power, the installation of a socialist government and the development of socialist institutions by the Bolsheviks in Russia as a Leitmotiv with which to start and end her text. Instead, she concentrated on the Bolsheviks' efficiency in developing the working class' and the Russian masses' capacity for revolutionary action. For her, this and only this was the lasting merit of the Leninist party. Her true interest rests with the millions of workers, peasants and soldiers building-up socialism from the grounds and not in the fact that the red flag was hoisted above the Kremlin. Here a side theme of her symphony begins to develop. As in earlier articles, the goal of her analysis of Bolshevik policies – both of her appraisal and her criticism – is overcoming the 'fatal inertia of the German masses' (Luxemburg 2004a, 284).

All of her articles on the Russian Revolution between spring 1917 and autumn 1918 asks with increasing desperation when the German proletariat will finally fulfil its historic duty for socialist revolution (Luxemburg 1974a; Luxemburg 1974b; Luxemburg 1974c; Luxemburg 1974d; Luxemburg 1974e; Luxemburg 1974f). The article *The Russian*

Tragedy (with the aforementioned note by Ernst Meyer) concludes with the words: ‘There is only one solution to the tragedy in which Russia is caught up: an uprising at the rear of German imperialism, the German mass rising, which can signal the international revolution to put an end to this genocide. At this fateful moment, preserving the honour of the Russian Revolution [in the eyes of Rosa Luxemburg this honour was endangered by the separate peace between Soviet Russia and the German Empire in Brest-Litovsk – Michael Brie] is identical with vindicating that of the German proletariat and of international socialists’ (Luxemburg 1974g, 392). Instead of the Russian Bolsheviks, her manuscript is aimed at the ‘inertia’ of German workers. Her criticism of Bolshevik hopes to lead German workers to achieve what she sees as the true accomplishment of the Bolsheviks in Russia: revolutionary socialist action of the masses.

But according to her, this cannot be ‘called forth in the spirit of the guardianship methods of the German Social-Democracy of late-lamented memory. It can never again be conjured forth by any spotless authority, be it that of our own “higher committees” or that of “the Russian example”’ (Luxemburg 2004a, 284). She is convinced that ‘not by the creation of a revolutionary hurrah-spirit, but quite the contrary: only by an insight into all the fearful seriousness, all the complexity of the tasks involved, only as a result of political maturity and independence of spirit, only as a result of a capacity for critical judgement on the part of the masses, whose capacity was systematically suppressed by the Social-Democracy for decades under various pretexts, only thus can the genuine capacity for historical action be born in the German proletariat. To concern one’s self with a critical analysis of the Russian Revolution in all its historical connections is the best training for the German and the international working class for the tasks which confront them as an outgrowth of the present situation’ (Luxemburg 2004a, 284).

In summary: whereas Luxemburg’s manuscript *The Russian Revolution* chiefly appraises the Bolsheviks’ success in finding the right slogans to move and provide the masses with a focus towards revolutionary action, she also follows a second goal, namely to criticise Bolshevik policies precisely there where they stand against this understanding of socialism as a creation by the workers themselves. Both high esteem *and* harsh criticism of the historic accomplishment of the Bolsheviks are measured by the same standard. For Rosa Luxemburg socialism always essentially depends on one thing: ‘The whole mass of the people must take part in it’ (Luxemburg 2004a, 306). This measure binds the manuscript together.

Whilst the first long part of Luxemburg’s manuscript appraises the Bolsheviks, sections III and IV concentrate on criticism. She focuses her criticism of the Bolsheviks on three central aspects: First, agrarian reform, second, the proclamation of the right of nations to self-determination and the separate peace with Germany, and third, the ‘suppression of

democracy' (Luxemburg 2004a, 299). The first two points are discussed in section III, and the third point in section IV; both are nearly equally long. These are the movements two and three of Luxemburg's symphony *The Russian Revolution*.

Luxemburg's Criticism of the Bolsheviks: Too Little Socialism, Too Little Democracy

Luxemburg's critique of the Bolshevik policies is well known. I will restrict myself to pointing to one unusual aspect of this criticism. As it were, both critical sections of her manuscript seem to oppose each other in an unbridgeable logical contradiction. First, the Bolsheviks are criticised for their policies on easing tensions between the government and possible opponents. She develops proposals that – one must assume – would have increased resistance to the Bolsheviks. But afterwards she recommends the Bolsheviks implement radical political democratisation. Let us look at this contradiction more closely.

In section III of the manuscript the Bolsheviks are criticised for their agrarian reform and policies with regard to the 'national question'. Rosa Luxemburg criticises the Bolsheviks' decision to give peasants land for their own private benefit and to grant the suppressed peoples of the Russian Empire the right to self-determination. She neither wants to strengthen private property, nor nationalist divisions. Rosa Luxemburg understood that 'as a political measure to fortify the proletarian socialist government' the Bolshevik policy criticised by her '[...] was an excellent tactical move' (Luxemburg 2004a, 290) aimed at 'binding the many foreign peoples within the Russian Empire to the cause of the revolution' (Luxemburg 2004a, 294f). In both cases the Bolsheviks yielded to the pressure of a large share of the population, whether it's the peasants, the Finns, Estonians, Lithuanians, or Georgians and so forth. Furthermore, the so-called peace of Brest-Litovsk grew mainly out of the incapacity of the Bolsheviks to continue mobilising soldiers for the war effort. Any other policy would have, at least according to Lenin, either made it impossible for the Bolsheviks to seize power or would have led to their rapid demise. Why then did Rosa Luxemburg criticise these decisions so harshly?

For Rosa Luxemburg Bolshevik power was to a certain degree a less pressing issue than saving the honour of the left. Although she does not say this directly, in my view I think she would have found it easier to accept the downfall of Bolshevik Russia than to witness a further betrayal of socialist ideals as had been committed by right-wing social democrats in 1914. This is especially true with regard to the prospects for socialist revolutions in Germany and Western Europe she regarded as decisive. Faced with the possibility that the Leninist government, which found itself in a hopeless situation in autumn 1918, might consider an alliance with the German

Empire to secure its power, she wrote: 'Russia was the one last corner where revolutionary socialism, purity of principle and ideals, still held away. It was a place to which all sincere socialist elements in Germany and Europe could look in order to find relief from the disgust they felt at the practice of the West European labour movement, in order to arm themselves with the courage to persevere and in faith in pure actions and sacred words. The grotesque 'coupling' of Lenin and Hindenburg would extinguish the source of moral light in the east' (Luxemburg 1974g, 390). Whoever writes like this, with such an appeal to absolute values, makes it clear they aim for all or nothing.

Although Rosa Luxemburg was aware of the political reasons behind Lenin's policies, she nonetheless recommended the Bolsheviks follow a strategy that would have placed them even more strongly in opposition to the population, in particular to peasants, soldiers and the periphery of the former Russian Tsardom. She assumed that any real steps towards a real socialist policy must at least not 'bar' or 'cut off' the road leading to socialism (Luxemburg 2004a, 291). Evidently, she envisages this socialism in the context of the predominance of social property and international solidarity of peoples within a unified Soviet state. Rosa Luxemburg could not accept the strengthening of peasant private property and the bolstering of the self-determination of peoples that had already been part of the economic and market areas dominated by Russia. She viewed the small property owners and the new small 'nation states' as the natural partners of imperialism and counter-revolution.

In the second movement of her symphony, to stick to this metaphor, Rosa Luxemburg recommends the Bolsheviks adopt a communist policy of centralisation and concentration of economic and political power grounded in robust principles and in opposition to what she calls the 'spontaneous peasant movement' (Luxemburg 2004a, 293) and the 'bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes' (Luxemburg 2004a, 295) of the suppressed nations. She sees the reasons behind the Bolshevik policies that in her view contradict socialist principles and assumes that 'unfortunately, the calculation was entirely wrong' (Luxemburg 2004a, 295). Historically this turned out to be a misjudgement, even though in early autumn 1918 many facts seemed to indicate that Lenin's government would fall. The Bolsheviks though were able to maintain power for 70 years; also thanks to the German and Austrian revolutions of November 1918, the outcomes of the civil war, and great internal and external concessions (the New Economic Policy) as well as accelerated industrialisation and expropriation of peasants (called 'collectivisation') in the late 1920ies and early 1930ies.

More interesting in our context though is the fact that Rosa Luxemburg proposed measures in the second movement, which from the point of view of the Bolsheviks would have created greater opposition among the masses of Russian peasants and the Russian periphery. Yet in the third movement,

she strongly refutes precisely the measures taken by the Bolsheviks to stabilise their power in the face of already existing opposition: dictatorship and terror. It seems Rosa Luxemburg believed that it was possible to simultaneously implement a policy of the immediate socialisation of the means of production (in the city and partly in the countryside) *as well as* a policy of all-encompassing democratisation. *Socialist* democracy and the establishment of *democratic* socialism should go hand-in-hand (Luxemburg 2004a, 308).

Rosa Luxemburg saw the separation of interests in any area of the economy as strengthening private property. Equally, she believed that allowing entire peoples to leave the imperial constructs into which they had been economically integrated constituted a division of the working class. She was also against any alliance with the internal or foreign bourgeoisie. But at the same time, she demanded freedom of speech and assembly, and elections that were open to the participation of the government's opponents and their foreign 'advisories'. Rigorously and fundamentally, she therefore emphasized: 'Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution' and that it led to 'the dictatorship of a handful of politicians' (Luxemburg 2004a, 307). This dictatorship she then characterizes as 'bourgeois' precisely because it is a 'dictatorship for a handful of persons' (Luxemburg 2004a, 307). She justifies this again by solving the antagonism between dictatorship and democracy in her own way: 'The proletariat, when it seizes power, can never follow the good advice of Kautsky, given on the pretext of the "unripeness of the country", the advice being to renounce the socialist revolution and devote itself to democracy. It cannot follow this advice without betraying thereby itself, the International, and the revolution. It should and must at once undertake socialist measures in the most energetic, unyielding and unhesitant fashion, in other words, exercise a dictatorship, but a dictatorship of the *class*, not of a party or of a clique-dictatorship of the class, that means in the broadest public form on the basis of the most active, unlimited participation of the mass of the people, of unlimited democracy' (Luxemburg 2004a, 307f.).

Rosa Luxemburg sees the reason behind the failure of the Bolsheviks to gain broad support – and this in spite of the numerous concessions they made – alone in the fundamental opposition to socialism of the bourgeoisie, petty-bourgeoisie and peasants. She argues that the departure from socialist principles cost the Bolsheviks the support of the masses of workers and strengthened counter-revolutionary forces. She writes: 'Instead of warning the proletariat in the border countries against all forms of separatism as mere bourgeois traps, they did nothing but confuse the masses in all the border countries by their slogan and delivered them up to the demagogy of the bourgeois classes. By this nationalistic demand they brought on the disintegration of Russia itself, pressed into the

enemy's hand the knife which it was to thrust into the heart of the Russian Revolution' (Luxemburg 2004a, 297).

The Anticipated Harmony of Opposites: Needs and Freedom

But how can this work? Use of the 'iron hand' of 'proletarian dictatorship' to suppress all interests not immediately in line with a socialism understood like common ownership of the means of production *and* 'freedom of the press', 'the right to association and assembly' (Luxemburg 2004a, 307), implementing measures in an 'unyielding and unhesitant fashion' while allowing 'unlimited democracy'? Rosa Luxemburg, it appears, wants something that is impossible and she even wants it democratically. Sections III and IV – or the second and third movement of her 'symphony' – stand in clear opposition to each other. She demands both at the same time – the suppression of all social and nation state plurality *and* the highest appraisal of political freedom; the struggle with an iron hand against all private possession of land and against splitting Russia *and* the greatest possible promotion of political freedom and democracy as the 'living sources of all spiritual riches and progress' (Luxemburg 2004a, 306). Historically, at least, these opposites fell apart. Whereas bourgeois-capitalist society and political democracy proved to be at least temporarily compatible, this was not the case for the type of socialism characterised by a centrally planned, nationalised economy.

Rosa Luxemburg overcame these contradictions; in the end, she united them and created a vision of true harmony of the two opposed movements. This unity was only possible because she was convinced that through their everyday practices workers and the masses would change the 'thousands of complicated difficulties' that develop while constructing socialism into 'unobstructed, effervescing life' (Luxemburg 2004a, 306). 'Social instincts in place of egotistical ones, mass initiative in place of inertia, idealism which conquers all suffering, etc., etc.' (Luxemburg 2004a, 306) would develop. She believed that these instincts and initiatives as well as the necessary idealism would take society in exactly the direction of the form of socialism she proposed once the basic institutions of common ownership were put in place. Therefore, she could envisage that the greatest degree of freedom would lead to the greatest degree of insight into the truth of socialism as a society of socialised property, common interests, internationalism and peace.

But Rosa Luxemburg also seems to have believed that the opposite is true too. By stopping peasants, if necessary by force, from privately appropriating land and forcing them into collective forms of production, by not granting national independence to the peoples of the Russian Empire but instead keeping them within a political and economic sphere where they work together in socialised factories, and participate in

the development and implementation of production plans, a space for experiences develops that will lead to the acceptance of this socialism. According to her, this would lead to support for socialism and its enthusiastic defence. In particular, her discussion of the national question points in this direction. Driven by bourgeois nationalists, she believes, the separation into different peoples develops into hatred. She seems to have thought that even if unity in a revolutionised country was implemented in the beginning when necessary by force, acceptance of this unity would later develop.

In Rosa Luxemburg the free action by the masses and historic necessity have a tendency to go hand-in-hand. Leadership then, is mainly the capacity to actively promote this development. To her, dictatorship and terror are the deadly enemies of socialism because by suppressing freedom of action by the masses they equally suppress the real agents of any enforcement of socialist demands. Dictators are the gravediggers of socialism because they bury the agents of socialism in the prison of a command society from which there can be no path towards the realm of freedom.

In contrast to Lenin and Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg simply did not believe that spontaneously-arising convictions would necessarily lead away from socialism and that there was therefore a need to install socialist 'consciousness' in the working class from outside (something Lenin was willing to do even by force). Instead, she believed that the everyday practices of workers and the working masses would lead directly to socialism – at least if such a practice were free and built on autonomous action and not on paternalism and manipulation. Furthermore, there would have to be a true unity of production and life. As Rosa Luxemburg had already argued against Lenin in 1904: 'The Social Democratic movement is the first in the history of class societies which reckons, in all its phases and through its entire course, on the organization and the direct, independent action of the masses' (Luxemburg 2004b, 251). To her, socialism is not a centrally planned machine. Instead, it is life, free action by free men and women united by direct cooperation. Should such a relation between direct experience and socialist goals – conceived as the socialisation of the means of production – really exist, then, and only then, would the dictatorship of a party and terror not only be morally wrong but also the wrong means of building political power. Rosa Luxemburg repeatedly emphasized this. What she did not realise though, is that if socialism is understood as a centralised social economy then it is diametrically opposed to the free action of the masses. Yet Rosa Luxemburg never critically reflected on the necessary pre-conditions for her assumptions on socialism, and instead only pointed to concrete problems emerging in the Bolshevik attempt to implement socialism in post-war Russia.

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