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## **Luxemburg, Rosa**

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### **Introduction**

Rosa Luxemburg (Rozalia Luxemburg, 1870–1919), born in Zamość (Poland) in a wealthy Jewish family highly committed to children education, was a distinguished figure of the German social democracy, the co-founder of the Spartacus League together with Karl Liebknecht, and eventually killed in Berlin as a result of the repression under the social democratic government following the January Communist Revolt in 1919.

When she was a child, her family moved to Warsaw looking to improve a diminished fortune and to dodge the conflict between Jewish Orthodoxy and the anti-Jewish sentiment in the town (Ettinger 1986, 6). Nevertheless, hostility against Jews was ongoing in Warsaw as well, where she experienced segregation at school and the Christmas Day pogrom of 1881.

Hard worker, arrogant, and even aggressive, continuously controlling her limp, she soon joined illegal socialist groups. Ceaselessly within the framework of an intense political activity in socialist forums, with special influence in Poland, Russia, and Germany, in 1889, Luxemburg left Poland to study in Zurich (her doctoral

dissertation concerned *The Industrial Development of Poland*) and a marriage of convenience in 1897 granted her the German nationality, allowing her to settle in Berlin.

The main feature of Rosa Luxemburg is the critical attitude present in her thought and writings, which made her an uncomfortable comrade, at times refused, at times forgotten, and often reinterpreted and mystified (Arendt 1966). Among others, she argued with Lenin, broke with Bernstein and revisionism, and criticized Marx from a Marxist perspective. A defender of the role of the mass against elite prominence in the proletarian revolution, she refused revisionism, inasmuch as to her mind, the postwar legal reforms improving working conditions reflected that the state had been taken over by capitalism and her position against workers' participation in the First World War led to Espartaquisme or Luxemburgism as a split of the Social Democratic Party of Germany in favor of a global socialism (Nye 1994, xviii).

### **Democracy**

Luxemburg maintained a radical concept of democracy against the bureaucratic experience both in Russia and in Germany. According to the author's thought, socialism represents the best chance for democracy to survive at her time (Luxemburg 1900, 88; Nettle 1966). Democracy for Luxemburg is neither the bourgeois

democracy nor can it be expressed in the decision of an enlightened elite, which would mean dictatorship. This is one of the keys to understanding her position against both German social democracy and Lenin.

The role of the vanguard of the proletariat and the meaning of the right to self-determination were two points of discussion with Lenin (Luxemburg 1918). As workers were represented as incapable of developing a political consciousness, Lenin defended the leadership of the party in the organization and the achievement of power. However, Rosa Luxemburg regarded the prominence of the mass as a condition to keep into consideration the needs of the workers and to obtain their emancipation, the aim of the revolution (Mattick 1978, 32). Even acknowledging the intellectual role of the party, spontaneity was seen as an unavoidable ingredient of the revolution.

From Luxemburg's point of view, the right of nation to self-determination, apart from giving it a metaphysical allure, does not shed light on the demand of the abolition of classes and the full legal equality of all citizens before the law nor on linguistic rights and local self-government. Additionally, nationalism hides the antagonism between classes in the society by depicting the nation as a homogeneous entity. According to Luxemburg, from a socialist perspective, the nationality question concerns class interests, and workers' national question is not the same thing as bourgeois nationalism. Her position in relation to nationalism expresses a point of view both on imperialism and in relation to democracy. The defense of the latter includes the rights to free speech, free press, and freedom of association and of assembly but not necessarily "the right of nations to self-determination" (Luxemburg 1909, 1910).

## **Reform or Revolution**

Rosa Luxemburg rejected revisionism as an opportunistic method and warned against labor reforms that could cause troubles inasmuch as they could "stop the collapse of the capitalist system" (Luxemburg 1908, 47). As a matter of

fact, Bernstein described trade unions, social reforms, and the political democratization of the state as the tools for a progressive realization of socialism. From Luxemburg's perspective, these instruments were aimed at the interest of capital in a context where the state became capitalist and thus unsuitable for controlling the development of the economy in a socialist way. Furthermore, the improvement in the living conditions of the working class pursued by revisionism implies the attenuation of class antagonisms (Luxemburg 1900, 75).

In the alternative between reform and revolution expressed by revisionism, Luxemburg defended the revolution through democracy, which implies seizing power through a proletarian control over both means of production and the decision on the distribution of wealth, for which mass strike is considered to be a powerful and indispensable device.

## **The Woman Question**

Rosa Luxemburg did not regard woman question as different from socialist struggle (Abrahams 1989, 48–56). The author was not a feminist at all, and she addressed critical commentaries to women from dominant classes; to her mind it was even more conservative and oppressive than men and socially useless except for the reproduction of the dominant classes themselves.

Her defense on women's suffrage is presented as a class concern and as a consequence of the actual participation of socialist women in politics. The right to vote for Luxemburg is the final right but just as part of a broader political participation.

Given the maturity of proletarian women and their active role in society, "disfranchisement of women," and monarchy, were relics of the past, both still alive inasmuch as "powerful tools of anti-popular interests" with a "place among the most important tools of capitalist class domination." The exclusion of the proletariat is functional to capitalism, seeing that women had always been enemies of militarism, monarchy, and indirect taxation ("the organized robbery of tariffs and



taxes on foodstuffs,” Luxemburg 1912) among other institutions.

## Imperialism

Luxemburg refused imperialism from the perspective of the defense of universal interests of the workers against an everywhere oppressive capitalism. This argument is also present in her works against the Germanization of Poland (Luxemburg 1900). In the author’s opinion, imperialism moves the “source of surplus value” from western workers to foreign lands (Nye 1994, 41; Luxemburg 1913).

To a large extent, imperialism is the response of capitalism that prevents its collapse by improving workers’ living conditions in Europe at the cost of workers’ exploitation from other parts of the world. The maneuver is doubly regressive from the point of view of the revolution since, in addition to serving as an escape for the crises, it makes the workers identify their interests with those of the bourgeoisie, blurring their class consciousness.

Her position with regard to imperialism, on the other hand, highlighted by the criticism of various German campaigns, acquires clarity by means of her opinion on colonial oppression, in addition to her understanding of nationalism and her rejection of participation in the war that led to the segregation of the Spartacist League. In relation to the national issue, Rosa Luxemburg offers tools to distinguish bourgeois nationalism from nationalism related to democracy. The breakdown of the Socialist International, largely caused by national sentiments – which Rosa Luxemburg, unlike her comrades, had tried to approach from materialism – eventually turned the workers’ movement into a nearly entirely national one.

## Conclusion

Rosa Luxemburg was a woman concerned with her times. There is no finding a whole system of thought in her work, but there can be found

concrete answers to the pitfalls on the road toward the emancipation of the proletariat.

The originality of her thought lies in her freely searching for those answers, without feeling influenced by either of the two major lines of interpretation of Marxism at the times she lived in. Her radical conception of democracy; her firm belief that oppression was a universal condition of all workers in which all other traits such as nationality, sex, or ethnicity were included; and the goal of putting an end to capitalism through revolution place the author at odds with Lenin’s dictatorial drift and against German social democracy compliance with the schemes of capitalism.

## Cross-References

- ▶ Arendt
- ▶ Bebel
- ▶ Bernstein
- ▶ Kautsky
- ▶ Kollontai
- ▶ Lenin
- ▶ Zetkin

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