

SPECIAL SECTION ON ROSA LUXEMBURG'S POLITICAL ECONOMY

## Introduction: Rosa Luxemburg's Political Economy Contributions to Contemporary Political Theory and Practice

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It is fitting that our special issue on Rosa Luxemburg is our most international volume to date, with many contributors sharing migrant histories and working at universities based in Canada, Germany, Spain and the United States. We are fortunate to have several of the foremost Luxemburg scholars today contributing analyses, with each author tackling different aspects of Luxemburg's rich legacy, including theories of capitalist crisis, colonization, feminism, imperialism and war, and doing so from disciplinary roots in economics, English, history, labour studies, philosophy and more.

Klaus Dörre draws upon the concept of *Landnahme* to explore the dialectical relationship between the 'inside' and 'outside' spaces created by capital within the capitalist world system. He argues that the 'inside' is characterized by capitalistic market relationships and 'normal' exploitation within a crisis-ridden system. The 'outside' is simultaneously a realm of superexploitation and non-commodified spaces, including, for example, public health and education services but also traditional, non-market relationships, in agriculture or other domains, that are continually ripe for recommodification. Importantly, the 'inside' and the 'outside' of capitalism are less defined by national boundaries than by the simultaneous coexistence of capitalist and non-capitalist relationships across national borders and the world system. Dörre mobilizes this insight to explain the historic rise of financial capitalism, with an emphasis on the specific case of German 'coordinated capitalism'. In particular, he explores the mechanisms that lead relatively secure workers to eschew strategies based on a unified, class-conscious political force for defensive, corporatist positions that export employment insecurity and precarity to marginalized populations. Dörre concludes by setting out six analytical trajectories that may be particularly useful for contemporary working class struggle, including for a class conscious ecological politics.

Peter Hudis analyses as yet unpublished and lesser-known works by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Marx to explore processes of labour commodification, specifically, the transformation of peasants into 'free'

workers in the global periphery. Hudis contrasts Engels' approach to non-Western societies with Luxemburg's and Marx's independent but parallel analyses, both pointing to contradictory tendencies within non-Western communities. They both argue, for example, that Indigenous communities in North America simultaneously contain revolutionary socialist potential rooted in communal forms of living but also incipient hierarchies, including gender inequalities that, within a world capitalist system, portend inegalitarian social relations, including of the capitalist variety. Despite this common ground, however, Hudis argues that Marx had a much more cautious approach than Luxemburg to understanding the likely transformations of such societies. Luxemburg assumes that communal societies will inevitably be absorbed in a unidirectional historical process leading to world capitalism. In contrast, Marx argues that the outcome is uncertain, depending upon socially-conscious action that in the case of Russian communes, for instance, might lead to socialism without capitalism but might equally deteriorate into capitalist private property relations, especially given intervention by the Tsarist state. Hudis concludes that both Marx and Luxemburg have valuable insights into historical transformations across the world system, including underappreciated contributions to the analysis of non-Western societies. But, he concludes, Marx is more subtle than Luxemburg and better recognizes that people in the periphery have a vital role to play in their own liberation.

In his research note, Paul Le Blanc contrasts Luxemburg's contributions to socialist theories with those of Marx, Bukharin, Lenin and others. He draws particular attention to her analyses of imperialism as a necessary, but contradictory dynamic inherent to the capitalist mode of production. Like no other of her contemporaries, he argues, Luxemburg denounced the full horror of imperialism, the destruction of peoples and cultures, a dynamic inherent to the capitalist system with its tendencies towards 'limitless' capital accumulation. Further, Le Blanc calls attention to the ways that Luxemburg anticipated the current role of international financial organizations like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, seeing financial loans and large infrastructure projects as simply another face of imperialism, a way of tying new states into a hegemonic system favouring older states, at the expense of displaced, brutalized populations. Le Blanc concludes with Luxemburg's condemnation of capitalism as a system of war and violence, culminating in the devastation of the first World War: mass murder that Luxemburg saw as the final proof of capitalism's incompatibility with humanity.

Ingo Schmidt emphasizes that for Luxemburg, capitalism was always an international system, since the sustained accumulation of capital is only possible by continually incorporating new, non-capitalist economies into the capitalist system. By extending credit to 'natural economies', for example, demand is stimulated, excess production is absorbed and formerly non-capitalist territories and peoples are thereby incorporated into the capitalist system. States play an important role in this process, waging war to protect the interests of domestic against foreign capital and also to open up non-capitalist societies to capitalist markets. In considering the relevance of this argument for understanding today's crisis, Schmidt puts Luxemburg's work and Marxist criticism of it in historical context, noting how events like the 1930s crisis or internal Communist politics had an impact on how receptive other Marxists were to her ideas. Schmidt then goes on to sketch some ways that Luxemburg's political economy can be used to explain current transformations, notably the rise of neoliberal politics in the 1970s, but also the military aggressiveness of the declining hegemon, the United States. Following Luxemburg, Schmidt wonders if the incorporation of former developing states and the former Soviet Union and China into world capitalism heralds a decisive new moment of crisis in the world capitalist system. He asks: will this moment of crisis see the rise of a new hegemon, intensified imperialist conflict, or renewed working class militancy against the power of capital?

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Scott briefly sketches the historical context of Luxemburg's life, contrasting the turbulent times in which she lived and to which she contributed with the current moment, when the labour movement, particularly in the United States, is especially weak. Against those who understand Luxemburg as deterministic in her analyses of capitalism, Scott argues that Luxemburg always emphasized the vital role of working class struggle: the choice is between socialism and barbarism, but there is no automatic movement towards the former. Contrasting Luxemburg's views with those of reformist socialist Eduard Bernstein, but also with contemporary critics of Marxism, Scott argues for the ongoing pertinence of Luxemburg's views: on the state, including her understanding of the state's militarism as instrumental to buttressing the power of capital against labour domestically and internationally; on the fundamental incompatibility of capitalism and genuine democracy; and on the possibilities for 'socialism from below' and the potential but also the limits of trade unionism, with its risks of bureaucratization. Scott concludes that Luxemburg's insights are useful in understanding the current economic crisis. Crucially, if the barbarism of contemporary capitalism is to be

overcome it can only be through revolutionary activity by the masses themselves, not by a vanguard of professional politicians or trade union bureaucrats supposedly acting on their behalf.

Trincado argues that Luxemburg's thought is particularly relevant today, helping to explain the current economic crisis and the rise of financial capitalism. In her article, she considers the interweaving of Luxemburg's biography, as a revolutionary woman actively engaged in socialist politics, with her theoretical contributions. Trincado insists that although Luxemburg struggled against sexism and as a result of her disability and was ultimately assassinated, she cannot be considered a victim. Rather, Luxemburg must be appreciated for her active struggle for an open intellectual approach linked to revolutionary politics. This openness led her to question nationalism that did not serve the cause of international socialism, party and trade union politics disconnected from the spontaneous struggle of the masses, and Marxist theories that are not constantly compared against and related to the social experiences of class struggle. In particular, Trincado argues that Luxemburg developed a new concept of alienation, one steeped in her appreciation of art and literature, but also in the simple appreciation of every moment of life. For Luxemburg, Trincado argues, liberation is understood as perpetual movement, a collective participation by the masses in history, based upon a fundamental openness to the possibilities for revolutionary change.

As these brief summaries suggest, Luxemburg's work is broad and multifaceted and there is disagreement among progressive scholars about the specific strengths and weaknesses of her theories. For example, there is no consensus about how 'deterministic' or how 'open' her view of history really was, with some authors in this issue lamenting a certain determinism, and others arguing that, on the contrary, she was never deterministic and always committed to the idea of the contingency of working class revolution and socialism. In this debate, Trincado's approach may represent a 'third way', since she argues that Luxemburg was both strikingly *open* and critical in her theory and praxis, while nonetheless maintaining that the material – that is, social -- context of world capitalism means that working class consciousness is forged in particular and not infinitely malleable ways. Other contributions emphasize Luxemburg's committed internationalism, not least her analytical curiosity about non-Western societies and the ways they are articulated with Western capitalist ones within a world capitalist system, an analytical bent that seems particularly fruitful in the current era of capitalist 'globalization'. Others consider Luxemburg's arguments about the potential for forms of

worldwide class solidarity today, when capital and capitalism appears particularly strong and working class opposition, fragmented and weak. These kinds of concerns only scratch the surface, contributors' maintain, with Luxemburg's concepts potentially illuminating questions around the ecological limits of world capitalism, the articulation of feminism and working class struggles, and many more vital issues.

When Ingo Schmidt initially proposed the special volume on Luxemburg's contemporary relevance, another member of the editorial board privately suggested to me that it was doubtful we would have enough interest. The current analyses prove such doubts wrong: not only is Luxemburg's work exciting to progressive scholars in many different disciplines, a hundred years later, but her contributions are critically useful in helping us analyse the evolution of the world capitalist system up to and including the latest crisis today. These articles are just the beginning, a stimulus to further conversation around Luxemburg's life and work.

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