

Review: Rosa Luxemburg

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Jon Nixon (2018) *Rosa Luxemburg and the Struggle for Democratic Renewal* London: Pluto Press

Colin Waugh (*PSE* 98) argued that Rosa Luxemburg's approach to education, where she drew from egalitarian social systems to explain socialist economic and political ideas to working-class adults was 'independent working-class education at its strongest'. Jon Nixon's *Rosa Luxemburg and the Struggle for Democratic Renewal* provides an account of Luxemburg's life, an outline of her ideas, and some suggestions about how to apply her ideas to the present day.

Rosa Luxemburg was born in 1871 in Zamosc, in the province of Lubin, Poland, which was then Russian occupied. Her political education started with involvement in the Second Proletariat, a socialist group which was part of the resistance to Russian rule. In 1889, she moved to Zurich, to attend the University of Zurich which was one of the few universities in Europe to admit women. She studied biology and zoology followed by law and the social sciences. She retained an interest in the natural sciences for the rest of her life. The Socialist International was formed in the same year and this provided an organisational framework for Luxemburg to develop her political ideas and skills addressing how socialism could replace capitalism. Her PhD thesis was on industrial development in Poland.

In 1898 she moved to Berlin and joined the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). The next ten years were to highlight divisions in the SPD, present since its establishment in 1875, which led to struggles over revisionism, mass action and nationalism. These had a fundamental effect on Luxemburg's thinking and activism. She argued that the struggle for reforms had to be part of a struggle for revolutionary transformation.

In 1907 Luxemburg returned to economics and developed her work on capital accumulation into a theory of global exploitation. She lectured in economics at the SPD party school, which was attended by 30 SPD party and trade union activists, chosen by their local organisations. She was considered an outstanding teacher, able to explain complicated economic and philosophical concepts and relate them to the lives of her students. She contributed to defending the school from its critics,

who fell into two main groups: those who felt the school should provide a better general education and those who thought it should be a school for training activists. She argued that 'tactical know-how associated with practical reasoning goes hand in hand with conceptual clarity associated with theoretical understanding' (p27). She pointed out that the students would continue to learn throughout their lives and that the school should provide resources to enhance their lifelong learning. Many of these arguments are familiar today, for example on the pages of *PSE*.

In 1914, the SPD voted for 'war credits', providing economic support for war, thus taking an overtly nationalist position. This marked the end of the Socialist International. Rosa Luxemburg spent much of the period between 1914 and 1918 in prison, initially for inciting soldiers to disobedience. After Germany signed the armistice on 11 November 1918, a naval revolt in Kiel, an uprising in Munich, and extensive social unrest created a 'revolutionary groundswell' (p42) which led to the fall of the Kaiser and the founding of the Weimar Republic. The leader of the SPD, Friedrich Ebert, became Chancellor. However, this was not to be a revolutionary government.

Rosa Luxemburg formally broke with the SPD in December 1918, when SDP Chancellor Ebert allied with the Supreme Army Command. She worked with Karl Liebknecht and the Spartacus League to found the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), although it experienced some of the same divisions as the SPD. Luxemburg argued for participation in National Assembly elections but was defeated within the KPD. This was to be a major issue in the last few months of her life. She thought that socialism could not be created by decree nor established by government but had to be 'created by the masses'. She argued for 'a radically new kind of decentralised and community-led and internationally orientated governance' (p51). She saw the workers' and soldiers' councils as 'embryonic of a new mode of governance' (p51). But these developments were destroyed by the Ebert-Scheidemann government which had become increasingly repressive and anti-revolutionary. On the evening of 15 January 1919, Luxemburg and Liebknecht were arrested, interrogated and murdered. This ended the German

revolution, led to the fragmentation of the left, and contributed to a longer term failure to oppose the rise of fascism.

Why important today?

Jon Nixon argues that Rosa Luxemburg's contribution should be seen in the 'necessity for democratic renewal in the struggle for socialism and the necessary commitment to socialism in any struggle for democratic renewal' (p66). Her importance is also in 'rethinking the idea of socialism within a world of difference and deep uncertainty' (p67). She argued that a rethinking of Marx's legacy was needed. Nixon feels that these issues are still relevant in the early 21st century, even though the underlying social class boundaries, global inequalities and demographic trends are very different to Luxemburg's view of a rigid class structure and her assumptions about the homogeneity of the working class.

Luxemburg wrote that the struggle for socialism was not just about economic freedom but involved social and civic freedom which relies on solidarities that are not just a struggle for economic freedom but based on social exploitation and exclusion and political disenfranchisement. Many social movements of the 20th and 21st centuries have been committed to widening struggles from economic to social and civic freedoms. Luxemburg argued for a much broader view of workers or the proletariat, to include military, public sector and agricultural workers. She recognised the centrality of gender issues in revolutionary struggles and thought that 'proletarian women had to be the centre of revolutionary action' (p87) She also analysed the global effects of capitalist expansion, including an ecological dimension in her economic analysis that reflected her earlier studies of zoology and botany. All of these struggles are familiar over 100 years later.

Perhaps what is most important is Luxemburg's concept of the 'indeterminacy of history'. She felt that capitalism would 'implode under the weight of its own imperialist exploitation. The earth's resources would be exhausted and capitalism would collapse' - and would not necessarily lead to socialism. 'The future is what we make of it through deliberation and collective action, not what ideology defines it as' (p68). The exhaustion of the earth's resources has intensified over the last century, but the importance of deliberation and collective action remains central to any effective response to the world we live in. As Rosa Luxemburg wrote 'Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently' (p163).