You have been interested in Rosa Luxemburg since the beginning of your academic career. What makes her such a fascinating figure?

Yes, it’s true: Rosa Luxemburg has been with me, so to speak, from the beginning. My edition and translation of her political letters appeared in 1979 and my short biography *Rosa Luxemburg: A Revolutionary for Our Times* was published in 1980—and it remains in print. Few historical figures speak especially to young radicals in such a direct fashion. Rosa (as everyone called her) was a charismatic personality, a woman, and a Jew, who must have been a sparkling orator. She was the first woman to receive a doctorate in political economy from the University of Zurich and she was probably the finest theoretician of the socialist labor movement prior to the First World War. Rosa had an independent and wide-ranging intellect. She was fascinated by nature, she studied botany in her spare time, and she was steeped in history and the classics of literature. She also must have exhibited a kind of personal warmth that is difficult to convey. Rosa had her lovers and her circle of intimate and extraordinarily loyal female friends—she also had an innate sympathy for animals. Make no mistake: Rosa was ambitious and impatient, sometimes dogmatic
in her judgments, patronizing with her friends, sometimes difficult and self-righteous. Too often her ideals made her blind to existing political realities. Not even her critics, however, questioned Rosa's bravery and her passionate dedication to democracy and socialism. Luxemburg was a genuinely honorable woman, a true role model, whose life and work has inspired generations of radicals and—I believe—will continue to do so.

*You seem to treat Rosa more critically in your initial essay than some might have expected. Or am I wrong? What makes her more relevant today than other socialist theorists—specifically other classical Marxists—of her era?*

My opening essay to this volume argues that Rosa’s political concerns are more relevant than ever, but that they need to be addressed in new terms for a new context. What Leszek Kolakowski termed the “golden age of Marxism” has passed. There is no longer a socialist party that claims our virtually unqualified loyalty or a meaningful international organization representing workers. Class consciousness is no longer the primary form of self-identification. There is no longer the same agreement on the agent of historical transformation or about the prospects for a capitalist breakdown—and there is no longer the same confidence in the ultimate triumph of the proletariat. We should not turn Luxemburg’s writings into holy writ. In her time, when “orthodoxy” was the name of the game, she worried greatly over “the stagnation of Marxism.” She criticized Marx’s views on any number of topics. We should approach Luxemburg in roughly the same way that she approached Marx: appreciative, critical, yet aware that we are in a new historical epoch.

What makes Rosa relevant? She embodies the alternative to Communist authoritarianism as well as social democratic technocracy. Her most famous line—“freedom is only freedom for the one who thinks differently”—appears in her critique of the Russian Revolution. Her claim that reform is akin to the “labor of Sisyphus” (thereby infuriating union bureaucrats) has a particular relevance for a period marked by austerity and the rise of the far right. More forcefully than any of her contemporaries, Rosa challenged the illusion that reforms mechanically build on one another to produce a kind of
irreversible progress. Her internationalist and cosmopolitan convictions are also important for interpreting globalization and confronting narrow forms of identity politics. Above all, however, Rosa recognized the connection between political democracy and the struggles of the working class. Her views on mass mobilization illuminate not merely the dynamics behind the Arab Spring but also the fall of Communism. In fact, there is hardly a competing contemporary theory that can account for recent transnational political developments sparked by unplanned uprisings from below. Better than anyone else, Rosa provides a starting point for what I call “the underground tradition” of libertarian socialism.

What do you make of the aura that surrounds Luxemburg and the Spartacus Revolt of 1919? What was its unrealized potential, its mistakes, and its importance for Rosa’s enduring appeal?

1919 witnessed an unrealized opportunity to combine workers’ councils with republican democracy and, speaking historically, Rosa’s death symbolizes that failed attempt. The Spartacus Revolt still captures the radical imagination but, in fact, two revolutions were taking place in Germany in that year. The ill-fated Weimar Republic was proclaimed on November 9, 1918, the product of what became known as the “aborted revolution.” It was immediately attacked from the right and the left. The new regime lacked legitimacy and its leaders lacked charisma. Conservatives, monarchists, and proto-Nazis instantly united in opposing the regime. Even liberals seemed more often swayed by exigency than conviction in supporting the Weimar Republic. As for the far left, it was appalled by the new regime’s refusal to purge the imperial judiciary and the military, nationalize large-scale capitalist firms, or liquidate the estates of the arch-reactionary Prussian aristocrats. Yet the great majority of the working class supported the Weimar Republic until the bitter end. Its members feared a repeat of the Communist seizure of power and bloody civil war—if the victorious powers of the First World War did not decide to intervene first, crush the revolutionaries and the republic, and set up a puppet regime. A significant proletarian minority, however, remembered the “great betrayal” by the SPD in 1914 when it endorsed Germany’s entry into the First World War. Along with supporters of the workers’ councils
that briefly arose in Munich, Vienna, and elsewhere, Spartacus sought to break with the old labor movement *tut court*. Its members were inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution and Lenin’s slogan, “All Power to the Soviets!” Led by Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, Spartacus soon formed the nucleus of what in 1919 would become the German Communist Party (KPD). To most the choice seemed clear: participate in the first parliamentary elections or support the insurgents calling for workers’ councils and a “soviet” Germany. Rosa called upon those on the left of the SPD to participate in the elections. She recognized the obvious: the protean Communist Party and the ultra-left were too weak (and would remain too weak) to overthrow the new republic. When her proposal for electoral participation was defeated, however, feelings of solidarity led her to side with the revolutionary workers. This idealistic gesture led to her death at the hand of proto-Nazi troops on January 15, 1919. But it also turned Rosa into a martyr—and her legend grew even while her politics, so to speak, went underground.

Why do you think that Luxemburg devoted no resources to building a tendency or an organized left fraction within German Social Democracy after her split with Karl Kautsky in 1910? In retrospect do you think she should have done so?

Organizing a “Bolshevik” fraction, which is what Lenin did in the tiny Russian Social Democratic Party, would have been impossible in a mass party with a strong bureaucratic and cultural apparatus like the SPD. A (minority) tendency formed around Luxemburg (with her approval)—but I’m not sure how much more she could have done other than split. And that she was unwilling to do. Was her break with Kautsky prudent? Probably not: on the occasion of the (second) mass strike debate in 1910, Kautsky along with Bernstein and other old-timers argued that it should be employed only as a “defensive” tactic when democracy and the functioning of the party was threatened—ironically it was actually used that way in 1920 when a defensive mass strike called by the Social Democrats defeated the reactionary Kapp Putsch. Luxemburg and her friends, however, wished to use the mass strike as an “offensive” weapon to transform society. As for the true right-wing Social Democrats, they insisted that “the mass strike is
mass nonsense.” Rosa’s decision to split the once unified left-wing of the SPD made it much easier for the right wing to take over the party and lead it into supporting the First World War. In any event, the overwhelming majority of the SPD opposed Luxemburg’s politics: it was that simple. Yet she remained remarkably loyal to the party. She opposed an organizational split even after 1914; she criticized the proposed creation of a new Communist International; and, had she lived, she certainly would have condemned Lenin’s “21 Points” and his demand for conformity with the Bolshevik party model. Why did she stress unity? I think Rosa basically agreed with Marx that the ability of capital to exercise its power depends upon the degree of organizational and ideological disunity among workers.

Could you elaborate on that? What are the implications for Luxemburg’s theoretical and practical legacy?

Rosa Luxemburg died at the historical moment when socialism split into three competing understandings in theory and practice: Communist authoritarianism, socialist republicanism, and the direct democracy associated with workers’ councils. She has been claimed (and then discarded) at different times by all three. She was very briefly the first leader of the KPD and she had worked with Lenin on various projects including the Second International’s famous peace resolution of 1907. By the same token, Luxemburg grew up in the atmosphere of the prewar SPD and she had battled for a parliamentary republic like her other Social Democratic comrades. Yet Rosa also experienced firsthand the Revolution of 1905 with its workers’ councils—Trotsky would later call 1905 the “dress rehearsal” for 1917—and she soon became the great advocate of the mass strike. Now, from the standpoint of today, Communist authoritarianism has been discredited; socialist republicanism has lost its radical character; and workers’ councils legitimately appear utopian. Many insist upon identifying “socialism” exclusively with one form or the other. But Rosa never did. And, in fact, Marx never did either. Under present circumstances, given what has transpired among the competing conceptions, it only fosters sectarianism and dogmatism to insist upon an analytic definition of socialism or the specifically democratic institutional form it should take. Instead, I consider socialism as a regulative
ideal (rather than a finished program of institutional arrangement) that is predicated on a class politics with what will remain an unfinished commitment to political democracy, economic justice, and cultural cosmopolitanism. In this sense, quoting Henry Pachter, “one cannot have socialism, one is a socialist.”

You were criticized for claiming that “Luxemburg foresaw how the Communist repression of bourgeois democracy in 1917 would unleash a dynamic of terror ultimately paralyzing the soviets and undermining public life (in Russia) as a whole.” Do you think that your critics would have been softer on you had you used the term “parliamentary democracy,” or even “liberal democracy,” instead of “bourgeois democracy”?

I don’t know. Liberals and Social Democrats might wince at my use of the term “bourgeois democracy,” but my critics in the debate were neither liberals nor traditional Social Democrats. Most of them are left-wing libertarian Marxists committed to workers’ councils and some of them view Lenin through the lens of the soviet. In any case, historically, Marxists and Leninists mostly employed this class designation for the “provisional government” of Russia that emerged in February 1917. More importantly, the Communist International used the three terms you mentioned interchangeably as it officially denied support for republican regimes struggling against political reaction during the 1920s. My point was to highlight Luxemburg’s insistence upon maintaining a plausible relation between means and ends. She understood all too well that revolutionary terror has historically tended to take on a life of its own. Once unleashed it becomes difficult to put the genie back in the bottle. Many on the Left still have not learned that terror is—employing a phrase from Max Weber—like ideology, “not a taxi-cab that you can stop at the corner and say ‘I want to get off.’”

What do you see as “Luxemburgist” about the Arab Spring of 2011?

Too many radicals and progressives were overly preoccupied with the establishmentarian fixation on elites, conspiracies, leaders, and the media spectacle of the Arab Spring. They tended to ignore the question of political agency and the dynamics of the revolutionary chain reaction that rocked the world first in Tunisia and then in Jordan,
Algeria, Albania, Bahrain, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and—of course—Egypt. As the mass actions of 2011 were underway I wrote a short piece, “Rosa in Cairo” that noted how this transnational set of uprisings fit the analysis offered in *The Mass Strike, the Party, and the Trade Unions*. Of course, Luxemburg’s pamphlet was itself inspired by a series of spontaneous protests that began in Baku in 1902, spread to Kiev, Odessa, and St. Petersburg, and ultimately engulfed the entire Russian Empire in 1905. The mass strike first expressed itself locally in the towns and cities through the actions of workers and then spread to the countryside; liberal political aims unified the working masses with progressive elements of the ruling class and, ultimately, brought about the first parliament in Russian history. Unfortunately, however, the dramatic character of the spontaneous uprisings tended to obscure the years of underground work by unionists and political activists. Something similar took place during the Arab Spring. All the uprisings were spontaneous and yet, especially in Egypt, where 3,000 strikes and protests had taken place since 2004, they were also mostly anchored in ongoing activities. Parties emerged organically, if chaotically, from the struggle, while the revolts were transnational and diverse expressions of a single process. Also, in keeping with Luxemburg’s view, the radical goal everywhere was for a secular parliamentary republic that would provide civil liberties and a measure of economic justice. Rosa placed special emphasis upon the formation of a democratic consciousness and what I would call a cosmopolitan pedagogy whereby one exploited community learns from another in an ongoing revolutionary process. Luxemburg saw in the mass strike a way to actualize the socialist movement as well as the untapped democratic capacities of the disenfranchised and the exploited.

*How do you understand the economic analysis Luxemburg provided in *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913)? What does this imply for her politics?*

Putting it very crudely, Luxemburg argued that production outstrips consumption under capitalism, which (as an open system) transgresses national boundaries. To this extent, indeed, she agreed with Marx. But Rosa did not think that he had sufficiently explained why investment would continue if the system is marked by underconsumption.
Without ongoing investment, of course, the capitalist system would immediately collapse. According to Luxemburg, therefore, an outlet for those overproduced commodities (including excess capital) must exist within the system itself. That outlet is imperialism. Or, to put it another way, the existence of precapitalist territories makes it possible for capitalism to function. In contrast to Lenin, therefore, imperialism is not the “last stage of capitalism,” or a derivative by-product, but is rather endemic to the survival of capitalism. Increasingly, international competition for control of these territories will, by the same logic, produce increasingly international wars. Crisis will follow crisis and war will follow war as, inevitably, precapitalist territories are transformed into capitalist states. An absolute limit to capitalist expansion appears. With no outlet for its commodities, no way of dealing with overproduction, and thus no reason for capitalists to reinvest, the system will implode. Her structural analysis provided a useful “scientific” foundation for her radical politics. Given the recurring crises of capitalism, and its future breakdown, reform can only prove a palliative and the movement must retain its revolutionary posture. Her economic analysis also justified her internationalist criticisms first of Marx regarding national self-determination for Poland and then Lenin with respect to the “right of national self-determination.” Of course, it also offers an explanation for the First World War and her principled condemnation of it in the Junius Pamphlet (1915). The Accumulation of Capital remains useful in making sense of globalization and perhaps even postcolonialism. But national conflicts still exist. Nor is every capitalist nation militarist or imperialist (and certainly not militarist and imperialist all the time). Is there an absolute limit for capitalist accumulation? I’m not sure it matters. More important is the ethical and practical struggle against those reactionary trends that Rosa contested all her life: provincial nationalism, militarism, imperialist arrogance, and the neoliberal demands of corporate capital.

What do you think Luxemburg would have to say to contemporary radical movements like Occupy Wall Street or left-wing parties like SYRIZA?

Rosa would surely have welcomed Occupy and SYRIZA. Both after their fashion attempt to link together the disenfranchised and
exploited elements of the population with an eye on class aims. Admittedly OWS was purely a movement that opposed electoral politics, and never wished to turn itself into a party, while SYRIZA is a political party whose electoral activity requires forms of compromise opposed by more radical elements of the Greek movement against austerity. In spite of her support, therefore, Luxemburg would probably have had her critique of both. In works like *The Mass Strike*, she sought to develop a (dialectical) relationship between decentralized and centralized forms of politics. As I mentioned previously, she also did not believe that extraelectoral activity somehow invalidated electoral participation especially when workers’ rights and political democracy are being threatened from the far right by mass organizations like the Republican/Tea Party in the United States and the fascist Golden Dawn in Greece. Radical organizers of OWS may have envisioned a new “horizontal” form of political organization, which was theoretically underdeveloped and had no mass support, but the movement actually played a pivotal role in electoral politics by throwing the Tea Party off the front pages, energizing demoralized progressives and the Obama administration, and changing the laissez-faire public discourse with its slogan “We are the 99%!” Someone like Rosa would surely have seen that the “horizontal” vision of radicals within OWS did not deal with any of the long-standing problems associated with workers’ councils or make direct democracy particularly attractive or salient in an age of globalization. Luxemburg would also have insisted upon making people aware that the threat facing Greece and southern Europe is not simply economic austerity and hardship for workers but the erosion of democracy and the representative character of republicanism. No party can fight for such political goals without reaching out to the masses and the radical elements inspiring so many of them.

_Some have accused Luxemburg of championing spontaneity. At times she seems to argue that unorganized workers are spontaneously revolutionary, only held back by the conservatism of their leaders. What do you think?_

Luxemburg was a critic of bureaucratic reformism from the time of her participation in the “revisionism debate” of 1898 and, a few years
later, she chastised Lenin in *Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy* (1904) for placing the party over the proletariat as the revolutionary agent. It’s true that both Eduard Bernstein and Lenin—each in his own way—insisted that the proletariat left on its own was capable only of trade union consciousness. But it is important to remember that Luxemburg’s critique of reformism was undertaken in the context of defending the revolutionary character of the SPD and, whatever her other reservations about Lenin, she never questioned his revolutionary commitments. Luxemburg’s primary concern was that (bureaucratic) party leaders would underestimate the innovative democratic capacities of the working class and the need to educate its members with respect to the revolutionary process. Or, to put it another way, strengthening the democratic self-administrative capacities of the proletariat required some form of centralized political organization. Luxemburg most clearly articulated her position in the *The Mass Strike*. There she spoke of heightening that “creative tension” between different parts of the revolutionary process. Luxemburg argued that the party, the unions, and the mass movement all had different functions: the party would develop a general program, educate the workers in the means and purposes of the struggle; the unions would articulate the economic demands of the proletariat as a whole; and, spurred by the contradictions of capitalist accumulation, the masses would provide the energy to keep the revolutionary process moving forward. Today, perhaps, it is more a matter of radicals working with existing organizations and movements in order to generate what I termed a “class ideal” that can identify programs and practices capable of benefiting working-class elements in all existing social movements without privileging any. In any event, Luxemburg sought to illuminate the dialectic between organization and spontaneity in the revolutionary process. She never relinquished that idea.

Some consider Luxemburg’s theory as fatalistic or teleological. But she also famously posed the choice between “socialism or barbarism.” How do you reconcile these two positions? Or can they be reconciled?

Rosa’s critics used to joke that her politics rested on moving from defeat to defeat to final victory. Of course, this is a caricature. But, I think, she assumed that socialism would ultimately triumph even
while barbarism was inscribed within the structure of capitalism. As with most deterministic ideologies, whether predestination for the burgeoning bourgeoisie according to Max Weber or the “inevitable” victory of the proletariat according to Marx, Luxemburg’s economic theory inspired action. It’s worth remembering that the greatest mass labor movement in history was inspired not by preoccupations with “consciousness” but rather by economic determinism or “scientific socialism.” Such an outlook gave workers confidence and let them believe they were on the right side of history. As her friend Wilhelm Liebknecht—among the great organizers of late nineteenth-century Social Democracy—put the matter: “I can see the socialist future appearing as present.” Rosa believed that too. She may have highlighted the choice between “socialism or barbarism” with the outbreak of the war but to claim that she was agnostic regarding the outcome of the struggle between them betrays a lack of historical understanding—and a distorted view of Luxemburg. It would reduce her Marxism to a revolutionary variant of the “ethical socialism” that she had condemned during the revisionism debate. No less than Marx, Luxemburg believed in the ultimate victory of the working class. “Order Reigns in Berlin,” Rosa’s famous last article, written for *Die Rote Fahne* (*Red Flag*), recognizes the defeat of the Spartacus rebellion. Nevertheless, she ends with a quotation from the radical poet (befriended by Marx and Engels) Ferdinand Freilingrath—“The Revolution will ‘raise itself up again clashing,’ and to your horror it will proclaim to the sound of trumpets; ‘I was, I am, I shall be.’” That may still be the case for the revolution; it is surely the case for Rosa Luxemburg.
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