

CRITICAL POLITICAL THEORY AND RADICAL PRACTICE

ROSA LUXEMBURG

Her Life and Legacy

Jason Schulman



CRITICAL POLITICAL THEORY AND RADICAL PRACTICE

Mainstream political theory has been experiencing an identity crisis for as long as I can remember. From even a cursory glance at the major journals, it still seems preoccupied either with textual exegesis of a conservatively construed canon, fashionable postmodern forms of deconstruction, or the reduction of ideas to the context in which they were formulated and the prejudices of the author. Usually written in esoteric style and intended only for disciplinary experts, political theory has lost both its critical character and its concern for political practice. Behaviorist and positivist political “scientists” tend to view it as a branch of philosophical metaphysics or as akin to literary criticism. They are not completely wrong. There is currently no venue that highlights the practical implications of theory or its connections with the larger world. I was subsequently delighted when Palgrave Macmillan offered me the opportunity of editing *Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice*.

When I was a graduate student at the University of California: Berkeley during the 1970s, critical theory was virtually unknown in the United States. The academic mainstream was late in catching up and, when it finally did during the late 1980s, it predictably embraced the more metaphysical and subjectivist trends of critical theory. Traditionalists had little use for an approach in which critique of a position or analysis of an event was predicated on positive ideals and practical political aims. In this vein, like liberalism, socialism was a dirty word and knowledge of its various tendencies and traditions was virtually nonexistent. Today, however, the situation is somewhat different. Strident right-wing politicians have openly condemned “critical thinking,” particularly as it pertains to cultural pluralism and American history. Such parochial validations of tradition have implications for practical politics. And, if only for this reason, it is necessary to confront them. A new generation of academics is becoming engaged with immanent critique, interdisciplinary work, actual political problems, and, more broadly, the link between theory and practice. *Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice* offers them a new home for their intellectual labors.

The series introduces new authors, unorthodox themes, and critical interpretations of the classics and salient works by older and more established thinkers. Each after his or her fashion will explore the ways in which political theory can enrich our understanding of the arts and social sciences. Criminal justice, psychology, sociology, theater and a host of other disciplines comes into play for a critical political theory. The series also opens new avenues by engaging alternative traditions, animal rights, Islamic politics, mass movements, sovereignty, and the institutional problems of power. *Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice* thus fills an important niche. Innovatively blending tradition and experimentation, this intellectual enterprise with a political intent will, I hope, help reinvigorate what is fast becoming a petrified field of study and perhaps provide a bit of inspiration for future scholars and activists.

STEPHEN ERIC BRONNER

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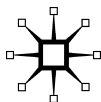
Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy
edited by Jason Schulman

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ROSA LUXEMBURG

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INTRODUCTION

Reintroducing Red Rosa

Jason Schulman

For those with a socialist politics that is uncompromising in both its commitment to democracy and its opposition to capitalism, it is common to raise the name of Rosa Luxemburg. A Polish German secular Jew, a Marxist political economist and political theorist, she was the most prominent leader of the left wing of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and a founder of the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL) and, later, the Spartacus League and the German Communist Party (KPD). Repeatedly jailed for her political activities in both Poland and Germany, she was ultimately murdered with her comrade Karl Liebknecht by the right-wing SPD leadership's militarist *Freikorps* (Volunteer Corps) allies in the aftermath of the failed Spartacus Revolt in Berlin in 1919. Luxemburg thus became both a heroine and a martyr of the socialist workers' movement. Though the Communist International of Josef Stalin, in the 1930s, denounced her as a "counterrevolutionary Menshevik" and sought to eradicate her influence, anti-Stalinist Marxists of various stripes came to her defense, however critically, and would continue to do so in subsequent decades.¹ And even today, more than 94 years after her death, Rosa Luxemburg refuses to finally die.

The current wide interest in Luxemburg's life and work is illustrated by Verso's ongoing publication of her complete works in English—a great undertaking—and the flurry of reviews and discussion that immediately followed the release of the first volume, *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*.² This Luxemburg revival has in fact been building up for some time, presaged by the republication of her economic magnum opus, *The Accumulation of Capital*, by Routledge in 2003; the publication also in 2003 of David Harvey's *The New Imperialism* (Oxford University Press), which draws from Luxemburg's work for its theory of "accumulation by dispossession"; the appearance in 2004 of *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* (Monthly Review Press), the first one-volume collection of her economic and political writings in English; a conference on *The Accumulation of Capital* held in 2004 in Bergamo, Italy; and an international conference on her ideas as a whole that was also held in 2004 at the South China Agricultural University in Guangzhou.³ Also, as Estrella Trincado notes, Luxemburg has become increasingly popular with critics of capitalist globalization, particularly in Latin America.⁴

This is not the first time that Luxemburg has been rediscovered. Parts of the New Left of the 1960s, particularly in Europe, found in her writings a revolutionary-democratic alternative to both official Social Democracy and official Communism.⁵ Reading her 1904 article "The Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy" as well as her 1918 essay "The Russian Revolution," one could find something akin to a "premature critique" of Stalinism; in *Reform or Revolution* (1900) and *The Mass Strike, the Party, and the Trade Unions* (1906), Luxemburg provides, respectively, a dissection of the ideological foundations of class-collaborationist Social Democratic "revisionism" and an attempt to make the practice of the SPD live up to the revolutionary content of its official theory (Marxism) via lessons learned from the Russian Revolution of 1905. Her strident opposition to the First World War—and to the support of that war by most of the leadership of international Social Democracy, particularly that of the SPD—also made her an emblem for many New Left-era radicals fighting to end the Vietnam War, and again today for radicals opposing the United States' occupation of both Afghanistan and Iraq.

The return of Rosa Luxemburg coincides with the latest rekindling of interest in her primary intellectual and political influence, Karl

Marx. There is, after all, nothing like a global crisis of capitalism to bring forth Marx from the grave once again. Whisked off to the dustbin of history after the fall of Stalinist Communism, today even mainstream commentators are looking to Marx for explanations of the failures of global neoliberal capitalism and copies of *Capital*, Vol. 1 are flying off of bookstore shelves in Marx's native Germany. The critique of political economy has made a comeback, and those who practice it have gained notice even in the publications of the high priests of capitalism; witness the praise—however tempered—for David Harvey's *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* in the *Financial Times* and Robert Brenner's *The Economics of Global Turbulence* in the *Wall Street Journal*. As noted earlier, Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* is also being rediscovered, with some arguing that "her discussions of capital's 'Struggle against the Peasant Economy,' the role of 'International Loans,' and 'Militarism as a Province of Accumulation' . . . read as if she [were] writing about present-day multinationals, international financial institutions and military-industrial complexes."⁶ Notably, relatively neglected economic works by Luxemburg, such as her *Introduction to Political Economy* and lectures at the SPD's school in Berlin (1907–14), are now appearing complete in English for the first time.⁷

But even if interest in Marx and Luxemburg has returned, Marxism—that is, a mass movement informed by the work and political perspective of Marx—has not. This is perhaps surprising, given that *socialism* has proven that it will not simply go away, particularly as an epithet used by the American Right. But what are the politics of socialism? Here—despite his well-documented radical-democratic standpoint—it is impossible to solely invoke Marx; given the multiple authoritarian states that once ruled in his name, it becomes necessary to also invoke specific subsequent Marxists in order to construct a useable and desirable Marxist political tradition as an alternative to what became codified as "Marxist-Leninist" orthodoxy. In this regard, few figures stand out as prominently as Rosa Luxemburg.

One of the most prominent scholars of Luxemburg's thought is Stephen Eric Bronner, professor of Political Science at Rutgers University. The author of *Rosa Luxemburg: A Revolutionary for Our Times* (Penn State University Press, 2004), he has defended Luxemburg as the "most important representative of a libertarian socialist tradition

inspired by internationalism, economic justice, and a radical belief in democracy.”⁸ He explains her contemporary relevance:

Luxemburg was a Marxist of the old school. There was nothing special about her commitment to republicanism and social equality. What made her unique was the special emphasis she placed upon the role of democratic consciousness, and what I would call a cosmopolitan pedagogy, whereby one exploited community learns from another in an ongoing revolutionary process. Democratic consciousness and cosmopolitan pedagogy have both played a crucial role in the rebellions that are cascading from one nation to another in the Middle East.

Moreover, Bronner writes,

Luxemburg never equated democracy with the will of the majority or even social justice; she knew that perhaps, above all, democracy rested on the protection of the minority. Her famous line from *The Russian Revolution* (1918) still rings true: “Freedom is only and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently.”⁹

But Bronner shows no interest in constructing a new “Marxist-Luxemburgist” orthodoxy. In an earlier piece from the democratic socialist journal *New Politics*, he claims that it is now necessary to free Luxemburg’s thought “from an outmoded teleology and [to draw] the right political consequences.”¹⁰ Such consequences include an understanding that it no longer makes sense to present socialism “as the *other*, the emancipated society,” particularly as revolution “is no longer the issue in the western democracies.” It follows that “socialism” must “initially be understood as a practice intent upon mitigating the whip of the market *through* the state and abolishing the exercise of arbitrary power *by* the state.”¹¹ Put another way, socialism is best conceived of today as “the ongoing creation of economic and political conditions in which working people can expand the range of their knowledge, their experiences, and their private as well as their public pursuits.”¹²

This redefinition of socialism and particular reading of Luxemburg’s legacy engendered much debate within the pages of *New Politics*. Many participants believed that Bronner’s argument conceded too much,

that it “foreclose[d] the historical possibility of human emancipation” and underestimated the extent to which existing, capitalist states “are barriers to addressing exploitation, oppression, alienation and ecological destruction.”¹³ They feared that such a position would lapse into the old “revisionist” stance of Luxemburg’s opponent in the SPD, Eduard Bernstein, who believed that the ultimate goal of an emancipated society “is nothing” while “the movement is everything.” Some argued that Bronner was too forgiving of the flaws of actually existing liberal democracy and too dismissive of the democratic possibilities of a polity based on workers’ councils (soviets). Some also claimed that Bronner set up too much of a distinction between Luxemburg and her sometime-ally/sometime-rival, the Russian revolutionary V. I. Lenin, to Lenin’s detriment, that he was too quick to believe in the possibility of furthering internationalism through institutions such as the United Nations, and too sympathetic to one aspect of Luxemburg’s thought rarely embraced by socialists: her opposition to national liberation movements.

And yet, all the debaters agreed with Paul Le Blanc’s comment that “the Marxist analysis of capitalism remains powerful, while the perspective of revolutionary working-class struggle for socialism is in a shambles.”¹⁴ So—as Lenin once asked—what is to be done? Furthermore, how can the legacy of Rosa Luxemburg help us to do it? That, ultimately, is the pivot in the debate, a discussion that highlights why Luxemburg remains important—and that sheds new light on the political meaning of socialism.

* * *

This collection reprints, for the first time, the debate from *New Politics*, a journal that has always been “Luxemburgist” in spirit. An institution of the American Left since its founding in 1961, it is perhaps best known for having published the seminal article by Hal Draper, “The Two Souls of Socialism,” in 1966. It was also the first English-language publication to publish articles by the dissident Polish socialists Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski. Like Luxemburg herself, *NP* has long insisted on the inseparability of democracy and socialism, and the publication of *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy* is consistent with *NP*’s mission of offering—as it says in the journal’s “Why We

Publish” section—“bold and imaginative radicalism.”¹⁵ Also included in this volume are three new pieces that reflect upon the debate—now over a decade old—and add new insights, as well as a new interview with Bronner that revisits some of the issues from the initial dispute and posits new questions.

A wide range of themes appears throughout the original debate. One pertains to the present status of Marxism. Is the economic and political enterprise of socialism now, as Bronner states, predicated on little more than an ethical commitment? Are the teleological aspects of traditional Marxism obsolete, its “scientific” pretensions now anachronistic? Can we speak of an “authentic” Marxism today? Can it again be a theory and practice of human liberation? In regards to Luxemburg’s Marxism, specifically, if it is true (as Norman Geras once wrote) that she unified theories of the bourgeois state, the character of proletarian democracy, and a viable socialist strategy, does that unity still hold—or is an immanent critique of her perspective now necessary in order to develop one more appropriate to the present?

In relation to the issue of contemporary socialist political strategy, other questions arise. Are existing liberal republican states simply not reliable vehicles for efforts to limit the rule of the market, or do they make it possible to address grievances and mitigate certain injustices perpetuated by capitalist elites? Can internationalist aims be furthered through institutions that are decidedly non-working-class in origin? Is the current marginality of socialism in political thought and public and social affairs due mainly to the embrace by too many socialists of antiquated political ideas (specifically, workers’ councils) as well as an unrealistic dependence upon outmoded political strategies and “solutions” to the problems of capitalism? Again, in relation to Luxemburg’s thought, was she correct in claiming that the fate of humanity is tied up with the choice between “socialism or barbarism”—or has history shown that there are other alternatives between “socialism” and “barbarism” in any given moment of crisis? Can revolution still be the ultimate goal of the labor movement, as Luxemburg insisted it must be?

The new essays both bring up new issues and interrogate the original ones. Amber Frost maintains that as the Left insists on the relevance of the architects of its theories, it often draws incongruous connections between recent and current events (the 1999 Seattle

uprising, Occupy Wall Street) and historical schools of thought, as well as narrowly focuses on myopic areas of work. Only with more comradely discursive exchange and a stronger connection to the Left's own activist history, she says, is it possible to effectively glean insight from Rosa Luxemburg's work. A stronger engagement by socialists with socialist-feminist thought and radical queer theory is also necessary.

Chris Maisano also connects the Luxemburg debate to the current moment. In Europe and North America, capitalist elites have taken advantage of the economic crisis to attack both the welfare state and the labor movement. While opposition to austerity is widespread, citizens have not been able to adequately express their opposition through electoral politics and public policy. This crisis of representation has compelled emergent movements like Occupy Wall Street to completely reject parties, representation, and the state in favor of "horizontalism" and prefigurative politics. Thus far, however, these efforts have not been successful in translating popular discontent into a sustainable political challenge to the rule of capital. Maisano argues that as Occupy's fortunes ebb, leftists should turn to the legacy of Rosa Luxemburg to help them integrate direct action and representation, spontaneity and organization, participation and leadership.

The final new piece, by Michael Hirsch, returns to the German Revolution of 1918–23, a "turning point of history where history failed to turn" (as C. L. R. James once said of the Bolshevik Revolution). It does so in order to combat the implication that the right-wing SPD leadership was "constrained" in supporting the First World War and in acting as an agent for big capital and the military, when in fact Luxemburg and her comrades showed that German workers had other options. Arguing that Luxemburg was *not* a teleological thinker, Hirsch claims that she merely (and rightly) viewed capitalism as inherently unstable, that socialism was no natural successor; barbarism was equally likely, with the choice in the working class's hands. This is why she counterpoised reform to revolution as ends, blaming the SPD's abandonment of revolutionary goals on its party and trade union apparatuses morphing into cooperators with capital. Contra Luxemburg, says Hirsch, Bronner overestimates capital's capacity to mollify discontent and restrain workers from solidifying sociologically and politically. Luxemburg is pertinent today for those fighting

austerity measures and those who know that electoral victories are possible but state power through the ballot box is not.

* * *

Despite the global discrediting of neoliberalism, the Left remains in disarray and at a strategic impasse. The social democratic Left, to the extent that it has not simply collapsed into the neoliberal Right, dreams of reviving the social-welfare regimes of the “Golden Age of Capitalism”—despite the impossibility of returning to the old days of the “Keynesian consensus.” The “Marxist-Leninist” and Trotskyist parties remain small and stagnant, splintered into tiny factions incapable of significant growth, nearly all of them governed by “democratic centralist” regimes that are long on centralism and short on democracy. New forms of anarchism and its cousin, autonomism, have played major roles in worldwide radicalism since the birth of the alter-globalization movement, paralleled by the rise of the Zapatistas in Mexico and the *piqueteros* in Argentina, reemerging again in the Occupy phenomenon after a near-decade of relative dormancy and theorized as a way to “change the world without taking power.”¹⁶ But there is no reason to believe that it is possible to change the world without taking power; as Leo Panitch notes, what is required is that “the balance of social forces that are in conflict in any society find expression in the transformation—in terms of organisation as well as policies—of the states in those societies.”¹⁷ Otherwise, all that is left is “resistance,” which all too often fails to lead to significant material change, typified by “the paramilitary nihilism of the [black-masked, property-destroying] black bloc, fetishizing physical confrontation with the police, preferring personal acts of rebellion in the here and now over the unglamorous job of organizing a conscious class movement. ‘Educate, Agitate, Organize’ has faded into ‘Agitate, Agitate, Agitate!’”¹⁸

The current near-universal impotence of the Left is reason enough to take another look at the thought of Rosa Luxemburg, who never failed to emphasize each part of the “educate, agitate, organize” slogan. We must again read Luxemburg not because she provides a ready-made model of revolutionary strategy to be emulated, not because she has all the answers to the Left’s current dilemma, but because

her democratic, internationalist, antimilitarist, antiopportunistic, and emancipatory socialist principles were the right principles. We need her sense of “democratic consciousness” and “cosmopolitan pedagogy.” We can no more treat her writings as holy writ than she did those of Marx and Engels, but we also cannot do without her. The main questions one will find in the debate within these pages are how best to apply her legacy today, how to discern what remains relevant, and what must be left behind. That is enough to demonstrate its pertinence for those trying not only to understand the world, but to change it.

Notes

1. See Leon Trotsky, “Hands Off Rosa Luxemburg!” (1932), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/06/luxemburg.htm>; Max Shachtman, “Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg” (1938), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtman/1938/05/len-lux.htm>; Paul Mattick, “Luxemburg versus Lenin” (1935), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/mattick-paul/1935/luxemburg-lenin.htm> (all accessed May 24, 2013), as well as Paul Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Work*, Edward Fitzgerald, trans. (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940). For later critical defenses see Tony Cliff, *Rosa Luxemburg* (London: International Socialism, 1959); Lelio Basso, *Rosa Luxemburg: A Reappraisal*, Douglas Parmée, trans. (London: Deutsch, 1975); Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Verso, 1983); and Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation, and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).
2. Georg Adler, Peter Hudis, and Annelies Laschitzka, eds.; George Shriver, trans. *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Verso, 2011).
3. The Guangzhou conference “included eighty participants from China, Japan, India, Russia, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, Norway and the US. While this was not the first time that a conference on Luxemburg had been held in China, it represented the most far-ranging and comprehensive discussion of her work in the history of the country.” Peter Hudis, “Rosa Luxemburg in China: A Report on the ‘Rosa Luxemburg’ Conference 21–22 November 2004—South China Agricultural University, Guangzhou, China,” *Historical Materialism* Vol. 13 No. 3 (2005), p. 318.
4. Estrella Trincado, “The Current Relevance of Rosa Luxemburg’s Thought,” *Socialist Studies / Études socialistes* Vol. 6 No. 2 (Fall 2010), p. 142.
5. Dick Howard: “With the growth of a New Left during the past decade, a *practical* reflection on the bases of socialism has again begun after years of Stalinism and silence. More recently, attempts to *theorize* the new

- practice have been undertaken... In the renewed debate, the name of Rosa Luxemburg is more and more frequently mentioned.” “Introduction,” Dick Howard, ed. *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 9.
6. Ingo Schmidt, “Capital Ideas,” *Red Pepper* (May 2011), <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/capital-ideas/> (accessed May 24, 2013). See also Riccardo Bellofiore, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg and the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
 7. See Peter Hudis, ed., *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg, Volume 1: Economic Writings I* (London: Verso, 2013).
 8. Stephen Eric Bronner, “Red Dreams and the New Millennium: Notes on the Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg,” *New Politics* Vol. 8 No. 3 (Summer 2001), p. 162.
 9. Stephen Eric Bronner, “Rosa in Cairo,” *Reader Supported News* (February 8, 2011), <http://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/289-134/4890-rosa> (accessed May 24, 2013).
 10. Bronner, “Red Dreams and the New Millennium,” p. 163.
 11. Ibid, pp. 165–66.
 12. Stephen Eric Bronner, “Rosa Redux: A Reply to David Camfield and Alan Johnson,” *New Politics* Vol. 8 No. 4 (Winter 2002), p. 160.
 13. David Camfield, “A Second Reply to Bronner,” *New Politics* Vol. 8 No. 4 (Winter 2002), p. 141.
 14. Paul Le Blanc, “Why Should We Care What Rosa Luxemburg Thought?,” *New Politics* Vol. 9 No. 1 (Summer 2002), p. 204.
 15. See “About *New Politics*,” <http://newpol.org/about> (accessed May 24, 2013).
 16. John Holloway, *Change The World without Taking Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2002); John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).
 17. Leo Panitch, “Global Capitalism and the Left,” *New Left Project* (December 20, 2012), http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/global_capitalism_and_the_left (accessed June 2, 2013).
 18. Bhaskar Sunkara, “Why We Loved the Zapatistas,” *Jacobin* No. 1 (Winter 2011), <http://jacobinmag.com/2011/01/why-we-loved-the-zapatistas/> (accessed June 2, 2013).

CHAPTER 1

Red Dreams and the New Millennium: Notes on the Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*

Stephen Eric Bronner

Rosa Luxemburg always seemed larger than life. An intellectual and a social activist, possessed of enormous charisma, she exacted tremendous loyalty from her friends and often a grudging admiration from her enemies. She struggled both as a woman and a Jew in the socialist labor movement and died a martyr's death at the hands of the *Freikorps* during the Spartacus Revolt of 1919. Her letters published following these events, and the castigation of her legacy during the "bolshevization" of the German Communist Party during the 1920s, provide abundant evidence of her courage, her sensitivity, and her humanism. None of this, however, gives her any particular salience for the present. Luxemburg disliked turning personal issues into political ones. She would probably have noted that there were many less heralded men and women—just as sensitive and just as brave—who died just as tragically. Luxemburg would have said: "Look to my work."

Especially in our neoliberal culture, however, her form of political commitment is as unfashionable as the values she held dear. Luxemburg was consistent in criticizing a strategy based purely on the quest for economic reform and unwavering in her contempt for

authoritarianism. She was a Marxist with a romantic vision of revolution and an economistic belief in the ultimate “breakdown” of capitalism. She remains the most important representative of a libertarian socialist tradition inspired by internationalism, economic justice, and a radical belief in democracy.

Appropriating her legacy, however, involves more than regurgitating the old slogans or finding the appropriate citations from her pamphlets and speeches. Luxemburg knew things had changed from the time of Marx, and she worried publicly over the “stagnation of Marxism”: the outmoded claims about political events inherited by the party regulars, including the independence of Poland, no less than the unresolved questions about the workings of capitalism. Since her death, even more profound changes have taken place. And what is good for the goose is good for the gander. The same critical method Luxemburg employed against Marx must now be turned against what appears inadequate about her own views. It is indeed a matter of freeing her thinking from an outmoded teleology and drawing the political consequences. Perhaps the following will offer some steps in the right direction.

* * *

Luxemburg was no slave of Marx. But she too believed that capitalism would create its own gravediggers. And if she liked to quote the famous line from Engels that the future hinged on the choice between “socialism or barbarism,” no less than most of her contemporaries, she felt confident about which would ultimately prove victorious. Everything about her politics derived from her dialectical understanding of capitalism and the revolutionary mission of the proletariat. Indeed, from the very beginning, she intuited that the political power of capital rested on the degree of organizational and ideological disunity among workers.

Luxemburg’s concern with internationalism followed from this insight and her dissertation written at the University of Zurich, *The Industrial Development of Poland* (1898), already provided the outline for her distinctive critique of “national self-determination.” Polish independence had been a demand of the Left for generations. In this work, however, Luxemburg argued that Polish independence would only slow the progress of capitalist development and thus the growth

of the proletariat within the (Russian) empire as a whole. Unqualified support for Polish nationalism would privilege symbolism over the need for a constitutional republic to replace the imperial regime. The arguments of Marx and his followers, she maintained, were actually anti-Marxist and self-defeating.

Luxemburg saw any endorsement of nationalism as a breach of proletarian principle. Her work highlighted the way this ideology strengthens capitalism by dividing workers, justifies the wars in which they will fight, and inhibits their ability to deal with what she correctly considered an international economic system. She would develop these themes further in her major economic work: *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913). It, too, would prove critical of views taken for granted in the labor movement. Marx had claimed that capitalism is based on investment and without it the system will collapse. Given his insistence that production always outstrips demand, however, no logical reason exists why capitalists should continue to invest and reinvest. Something within the very structure of capitalism must, Luxemburg reasoned, allow for the consumption of its surplus and thereby offer an incentive for ongoing investment. Imperialism was her answer.

New markets and cheap resources, the prospect of modernizing pre-capitalist territories both within the nation-state and abroad, seemed to provide the safety valve for capitalism. She indeed viewed the existence of such territories as the condition for the survival of capitalism. Should they ever become capitalist in their own right, which the dynamics of economic production guaranteed, then the international system would suffer an immediate “breakdown.” But that remained for the future. In the meantime, spurred by their own self-interest, capitalist states would have no other choice than to compete with one another frantically for a steadily diminishing set of colonies. Militarism and nationalism subsequently become intrinsic elements of imperialist strategies generated by capitalism: war is built into the system and incapable of reform. Thus, Luxemburg called for revolution.

* * *

No less than most Social Democrats of her generation, Luxemburg longed for a republic. Such was, in fact, the way in which the

“dictatorship of the proletariat” was generally understood in the decades between the fall of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the triumph of the Bolsheviks in 1917. The European labor movement prior to the First World War functioned on a continent still dominated by monarchies and the commitment to a republic was the political dividing line between Right and Left. Conservative programs everywhere called for authoritarian institutions and restraints on “the masses.” Social Democracy alone provided the alternative vision. Insisting that the working class would expand with the expansion of capitalism, assuming that its parties embodied the proletarian class interest, it only made sense to call for the creation of political institutions in which the labor movement could organize freely and ultimately rule as the majority. Therein lies the connection between Marxism and republicanism.

Luxemburg was a romantic, but never fully a utopian: the new socialist society was always identified with a certain institutional arrangement for the practice of politics. Her critique of “revisionism” in *Reform or Revolution* (1900), which made her famous throughout the labor movement, was far less based upon contempt for reform *tout court* than on her contention that an unqualified “economism” undermined the revolutionary commitment necessary for instituting a republic. Luxemburg herself supported “revisionists” in various electoral campaigns and fought for numerous reforms including the 40-hour week. She did not reject reform out of hand, but only insisted that it should be employed to whet the appetite of the masses for more radical political demands. Luxemburg was no different than Kautsky or Lenin or most other members of the socialist Left regarding the connection between reform and revolution. She was unique only in her understanding of what was necessary to bring the revolution about and the radical democratic purpose it should serve. This was what she sought to articulate in *The Mass Strike, the Party, and the Trade Unions* (1906).

The Russian Revolution of 1905, what Trotsky called the “dress rehearsal” for 1917, was the pamphlet’s inspiration. A series of spontaneous strikes beginning in Baku in 1902 gradually engulfed the Russian Empire. These seemingly spontaneous actions were, of course, indirectly influenced by years of underground party activity. Luxemburg extrapolated from these events in order to develop

her general political theory. She believed that the party should now preoccupy itself less with immediate organizational interests than with forming the requisite consciousness required for the political struggle. Thus, committed radicals should foster a certain “creative tension” between party and base in order to mitigate the bureaucratic tendencies of the former and the adventurist experiments of the latter.

This tension was exemplified, according to Luxemburg, in the mass strike. Here is the core of her notion regarding the “self-administration” of the working class. Deriving from a tradition reaching back over the Paris Commune to Rousseau, she understood democracy not merely in terms of securing civil liberties, but also inherently demanding its practical exercise. Socialism must therefore logically involve the extension of democracy rather than its constriction. The purpose of the labor movement was not merely the introduction of reformist legislation, but the creation of an institutional arrangement wherein workers might administer their own affairs without alienation or the impediments of bureaucracy. Her beautiful letters, written amid the factory takeovers in Warsaw during 1905, evidence her enthusiasm for the burgeoning “soviet” or “council” movement and the introduction of democracy into everyday life.

But this new enthusiasm never fully supplanted her original goal. Luxemburg intuited that only a republic could guarantee the maintenance of civil liberties. Genuine democracy is not simply equivalent with the will of the majority, she realized, but also with the ability to protect the minority. Her famous line from “The Russian Revolution” (1918) was not (merely) an *aperçu*. There is a sense in which her entire political project rested on the belief that “freedom is only and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently.” Luxemburg foresaw how the Communist suppression of bourgeois democracy in 1917 would unleash a dynamic of terror ultimately paralyzing the soviets and undermining public life in the nation as a whole. Even in 1919, while the Spartacus Revolt was brewing in Germany, Luxemburg vacillated between her traditional commitment to a republic and the new popularity of workers’ councils. Only when she was outvoted would she completely identify with the “soviet republic” (*Raterepublik*) and the policy of her less sober followers’ intent on emulating the events in Russia.

The Russian Revolution indeed inspired revolutions all over Europe and the formation of Communist parties around the world. Luxemburg was skeptical about the plans for a Communist International. She was fearful about its domination by the fledgling Soviet Union and the identification of socialism with its national interests. Neither authoritarianism nor nationalism was understood by her as some historical “deviation” demanded by the present, which the dialectic would set right in the future. She instead considered both as infringements upon that future. In the same vein, neither the party nor the revolution should serve as an end unto itself. It was the freedom of working people with which Rosa Luxemburg was concerned. This ultimately made her a rebel in both major camps of the labor movement. It is also what makes her salient for the present.

* * *

Rosa Luxemburg lived during what has appropriately been called the “golden age of Marxism.” The years between 1889 and 1914 witnessed a growing labor movement with a thriving public sphere whose political parties were everywhere making ever-greater claims to power. It was a time when each could see the socialist future appearing as present. That time is over. Marxism can no longer be construed as a “science”; the industrial proletariat is on the wane; and the labor movement is obviously no longer what it once was.

“Actually existing socialism” had its chance and little from history suggests that workers’ councils can either deal with a complex economy or guarantee civil liberties. New utopian speculations, moreover, cannot compensate for the lack of any serious alternative to the liberal republican state. The institutional goal of the revolution initially sought by Luxemburg has, in short, been realized. Presenting socialism as the *other*, the emancipated society, no longer makes sense. It is necessary to approach the matter in a different way.

Modern capitalism is no longer the system described by Charles Dickens. Its liberal state has been used to improve the economic lives of workers, foster participation, and provide the *realistic* hope for a redress of basic grievances. Luxemburg was wrong: the choice is not between socialism and barbarism. Not only has history shown that the

two are not mutually exclusive, it has also shown there is much room in between. The issue is no longer “capitalism” in the abstract, or the future erection of “socialism,” but the pressing need for a response to neoliberal elites intent upon rolling back the gains made by the labor movement in the name of market imperatives.

Or putting it another way: the contemporary problem is not the prevalent commitment to reform, which concerned Rosa Luxemburg, but the lack of such a commitment. Revolution is no longer the issue in the Western democracies and, in turn, this has general implications for the meaning of socialism under modern conditions: whatever else the term might imply, it must initially be understood as a practice intent upon mitigating the whip of the market *through* the state and abolishing the exercise of arbitrary power *by* the state.

Such an economic and political enterprise is now, furthermore, predicated on little more than an ethical commitment. Teleology, if not ideology, has lost its allure. Capitalism can survive and, more importantly, most people believe it will. But, ironically, there is a sense in which the very success of neoliberalism may attest to the validity of Luxemburg’s claim that the fight for economic reform is a “labor of Sisyphus.” Without an articulated alternative and a meaningful form of revolutionary agency, it is still necessary to roll the rock of reform back up the hill. This cannot be left in the hands of Social Democratic, or ex-Communist parties, intoxicated by neoliberalism and the unprincipled compromises associated with the “third way” or what is now being called “progressive governance.” Indeed, without forgetting the institutional arrangements in which real politics takes place, those with a more radical commitment to social justice must now increasingly seek new forms of alliance between workers and members of the new social movements.

Justice is a river with many tributaries. Most women and gays, minorities and environmentalists, have a stake in protecting the gains made by labor in the past as surely as labor has a stake in furthering many of their concerns in the future. The mass demonstrations contesting the inequalities and devastation generated by global capitalism, which began in 1999 in Seattle and triggered other mass demonstrations elsewhere, provide a case in point: they not only exerted real pressure on the Democratic Party, and momentarily united competing

groups in a spirit of internationalism, but also raised precisely those calls for international labor standards and environmental protection repressed in the mainstream discourse.

The genuinely progressive response to globalization still requires formulation. But nothing so demeans the internationalist spirit cherished by Rosa Luxemburg like the current insistence of some leftists upon the primacy of ethnic aspirations or national sovereignty over the international obligations of states to the planetary community. The proletarian internationals of the past have collapsed. The only institutions capable of furthering internationalism are now intertwined with capitalist interests and they tend to privilege strong states over their weaker brethren. But I think Luxemburg would have realized that the choice between furthering relatively progressive ends through imperfect institutions and simply opposing their empowerment is no choice at all. She was never fooled into believing that insistence upon national sovereignty would align her with the masses of the formerly colonized world rather than the corrupt elites who still rule them in the most brutal fashion.

Luxemburg may not have anticipated the rise of national liberation movements. She was surely mistaken in believing that the First World War had put an end to purely national conflicts and she ignored questions concerning the right to resist invasion. But there was a way in which she understood nationalism far better than her opponents. Luxemburg realized that nationalism, like authoritarianism, has its own dynamic and that it cannot simply be manipulated for socialist purposes or for the prospect of economic gain. Instead of relying upon historical “laws,” or dialectical sophistry, Luxemburg always correctly insisted on establishing a plausible relation between means and ends.

Diseases like cholera, dysentery, and AIDS are ravaging continents. Entire species are disappearing, global warming is taking place, pollution is intensifying, garbage is littering the planet. All this while a global society is taking shape in which wealth and resources are evermore inequitably distributed, political power is evermore surely devolving into the hands of transnational corporations, and petty ideologues are evermore confidently whipping up atavistic passions with the most barbaric consequences. The nation-state is incapable of dealing with most of these developments, and the usual invocations

of national sovereignty, or the disclaimer on any form of international intervention under any circumstances, are simply an abdication of responsibility.

No less than Machiavelli and Kant, in this vein, Luxemburg would have agreed with the dictum: "He who wills the end also wills the means thereto." Either planetary issues of this sort will have the *possibility* of being dealt with in the international arena through existing international institutions with the powers of sanctioning transgressors or they will *assuredly* not be dealt with at all. Human rights and new forms of transnational welfare policy constitute the only concrete prospects for a livable planet. The slogan of "the worse the better" has always been a losing proposition: the belief that intensified repression or exploitation will somehow automatically produce a progressive response is an illusion. The question facing the Left is whether to embrace outmoded forms of thinking or provide new meaning for an old vision. Make no mistake: its internationalist, socialist, and democratic values are in danger of petrifying. They must be adapted to meet new historical conditions without surrendering their bite. This is no easy undertaking and the possibilities for opportunism are enormous. But, then, Rosa Luxemburg never walked away from a challenge: I don't think she would walk away from this one either.

Note

*The following is the text of a lecture given at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Berlin on June 19, 2000; it was translated and published in the German journal in *Utopie-Kreativ* No. 123 (January, 2001), pp. 9–16.

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CHAPTER 2

A Critical Reply to Stephen Eric Bronner

Alan Johnson

What is the “salience for the present” of Rosa Luxemburg’s thought? That was the timely question posed by Steve Bronner’s article. Steve has done much to preserve Luxemburg’s legacy in his 1979 edited collection, *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, and his 1981 book, *A Revolutionary for Our Times: Rosa Luxemburg*. Twenty years ago Steve wrote, “Luxemburg understood that it was Marx’s method, not anyone of his particular judgments, that provided the key to emancipation.”¹ Now Steve thinks the condition for an appropriation of Luxemburg’s thought is a rejection of the dogmatic and teleological Marxist framework within which it was developed. I do not find this reversal persuasive. In Part 1 I suggest there are some general problems with this “post-Marxist” method of appropriating the legacy of Marxism. In Part 2 I challenge some of the new political conclusions Steve has drawn from his new Luxemburg.

Part 1: Ransacking the Legacy

Context is everything. I agree with Steve that simply regurgitating the old slogans of long-dead Marxists is worse than inadequate. And yes, we need the labors of critical re-appropriation, not idolatry. However,

these are banalities and it has been under the cover of such banalities that a wholesale caricature of the entire Marxist tradition, so-called post-Marxism, has established itself as the new common sense. The 1987 work, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, is the most important work of the new caricaturists. The central claim of that book—which Steve seems to have accepted wholesale—is that the entire Marxist tradition is at its core a dogmatism, a crude determinism, an “economic necessitarianism” unable to cope with the complexity of the world. The new caricaturists tell us that the thought of Marxism’s best practitioners, such as Luxemburg or Gramsci, can be of some limited use for socialists today only on condition that the useful bits (this insight, that concept, etc.) is extricated from the “teleological” and “deterministic” Marxist matrix in which it was deformed. The result has resembled nothing so much as the sack of Rome. When the Goths smashed up Roman buildings and dragged away bits of stone they created two things: rubble and fetishes. The post-Marxist Goths do something similar. They ransack Marxism for the concept of hegemony, which they hold aloft as the foundation for a new politics of “radical democracy.” However, they detach the concept from both the material structures and determinants that condition the battle and from the social agencies with the interest and capacity to enter the fight. This is rejected as so much “teleological” rubble, from the theory of historical materialism (“monist”/“necessitarian”) and the theory of capitalist exploitation and the capitalist state (“essentialist”/“economist”), to the theory of the revolutionary potential of the working class (“Jacobin”/“religious”/“classist”/“eschatalogical”).

Laclau and Mouffe’s impoverished and impoverishing reconstruction of Marxism, really a parody, has eaten through the United States and European far left like a cancer. The precondition of progress is to contest and refute it through our own scrupulous scholarly interrogation and creative development of the Marxist revolutionary project.

The English Marxist Raymond Williams argued that Marxism must balance two kinds of theoretical work. First, “legitimizing theory”: in other words we have to keep asking, “what was the legitimate inheritance of an authentic Marxism—including the identification of an authentic Marxist Marx—and thus, hopefully, an authentic revolutionary tradition.” Second, “operative theory”: in other words we

have to produce “theoretical analysis of late capitalist society; theoretical analysis of the specificities of [particular national] societies; theoretical analysis of the consequent situations and agencies of socialist practice.” Either kind of theoretical work practiced in isolation from the other is impoverished. A purely legitimating form of theory will be unable to reconnect to the “confused and frustrating politics of our own time and place.” A purely operative theory is likely to be eclectic, to mistake short-term problems for long-term crises, and to simply relinquish, rather than creatively develop, hard-won theoretical advances.

Marxism, warned Williams, can never reach a “finished” state. It must be re/made “in many of its elements [in] essentially unfamiliar ways” as it faces, square-on, “the altered social relations” of late capitalism. Williams’s own explorations of, for instance, the nature of a contemporary materialism, of the environmental impact of capitalist social relations, and of the new social movements, and their transformation of the prospects and forms of socialist transition, were efforts at creative renewal. He sought to bring the Marxist tradition—to which he came late—into a creative confrontation with the present, to refine and renew Marxism.

Legitimizing theory is often sneered at as “idolatry” or “sectarian.” This is a mistake. We democratic revolutionary socialists, miniscule in number and beleaguered, have to fight tooth and nail in this field.² Doing decent operative Marxist theory today probably depends upon doing “sectarian” legitimating Marxist theory. Marxism certainly has to be retrieved from layers of Stalinist filth. However, it also has to be defended against the post-Marxist reduction of the entire tradition to an “economic necessitarianism.”³

I think the effort to liberate Luxemburg’s thought from a “teleological” Marxist cast results in something less than the full measure being taken of its contemporary relevance. There are three points in Steve’s article where this is so.

First, Steve claims Luxemburg had a “romantic vision of revolution.” This is a view common to bourgeois, “Leninist,” and, now, post-Marxist commentators. However, the “romantic” label misses much in her thought. One of the merits of Norman Geras’s book, also titled *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, was to challenge this legend and, with great exegetical care, draw out the “hard-headed strategic

realism” involved in Luxemburg’s “theorisation of...revolutionary realities.” Luxemburg unified, as components of a distinctively democratic Marxist political matrix, theories of the nature of the bourgeois state, the character of proletarian democracy, and the outline of a viable socialist strategy. Steve seemed to me to spend much of his article wrenching these apart again. Geras summarized Luxemburg’s insight in these terms:

Method of motion and phenomenal form of the proletariat’s revolutionary struggle, the mass strike was in her eyes a way of breaking through the barriers erected by the bourgeois state against any direct expression of the will of the masses. It was a way of releasing and galvanising their energies, of overcoming the divisions and the weakness, created by bourgeois ideology and partly by the proletarian condition itself, in order thereby both to concentrate their strength and to impart to them a sense of it... Socialism requiring by its very nature the control of the working masses over the entirety of the social process, it was not possible to envisage that the road to socialism might bypass the direct intervention and active participation of these masses in movements of unprecedented scope and vigour... The proletarian revolution had its own specific forms proper to its unique objectives... Luxemburg was the very first to draw the lesson of 1905 for the advanced capitalist countries and to begin to pose the question of power there in a serious, and no longer purely propagandistic way... Luxemburg’s lifelong emphasis on the importance of proletarian, socialist democracy was not just a matter of some praiseworthy moral commitment on her part. It was that, but not just that. For it was also a matter of the most hard-headed strategic realism.⁴

Second, Steve alleges that Luxemburg held “an economistic belief in the ultimate ‘breakdown’ of capitalism.” This is indisputable. She thought that once capitalism was dominant throughout the world, “Accumulation must come to a stop. The realization and capitalization of surplus value become impossible to accomplish... the collapse of capitalism follows inevitably as an objective historical necessity.” Now this may be wrong but it is not, as Steve says, a “teleology.” For it to be that, it would have to include not only the idea of inevitable

capitalist breakdown but also an inevitable socialist triumph lodged immanently within the structure of capitalism. However, no such view can be found in Luxemburg. She wrote, “Bernstein doesn’t understand in relation to capitalism as a whole, that society’s objective development merely gives us the preconditions of a higher level of development, but...without our conscious interference, without the political struggle of the working class for a socialist transformation or for a militia, neither the one nor the other will ever come about.” For Luxemburg the collapse of capitalism is guaranteed, the victory of socialism is not. As Geras pointed out, there is a “resolute refusal, embodied in her political activity and theory, to countenance any form of economism or to wait for that economic process to work itself out.”⁵ In fact, Luxemburg’s view is very similar to Max Shachtman’s that if socialism does not replace capitalism then forms of barbarism will.

Third, Steve argues that Luxemburg “foresaw how the Communist suppression of bourgeois democracy in 1917 would unleash a dynamic of terror.” This suggests a simple continuity between Lenin and Stalin, and between the revolution and the counterrevolution. It risks throwing away the theoretical conquests the anti-Stalinist tradition made—at what expense!—over three-quarters of a century, not just those attempts at a materialist analysis of the degeneration of the revolution but more recent reconstructions of the political and ideological mistakes of the Bolsheviks from within the revolutionary socialist tradition such as Samuel Farber’s book *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy* (Verso, 1990).

Having said that, there is a common misunderstanding of Luxemburg’s critique of the Bolsheviks, which Steve does help us avoid. It is often thought that Luxemburg opposed the closing down of the Constituent Assembly, then changed her mind and supported it. In fact neither claim is true. She was prepared to support the Assembly’s closure on the grounds advanced by the Bolsheviks, that it was, by the time it met, politically unrepresentative of the country. Her criticism, surely right, was that Lenin and Trotsky “failed to arrive at the conclusion which follows immediately” from their own argument, namely, “without delay, new elections to a new Constituent Assembly should have been arranged.” Worse, “Trotsky draws a general conclusion concerning the inadequacy of any popular representation

whatsoever” and begins talking dismissively of “the cumbersome mechanism of democratic institutions.” Luxemburg points out that “the remedy which Trotsky and Lenin have found, the elimination of democracy as such, is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure; 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.”⁶

Part 2: Marxism Today

I have suggested some contextual and exegetical problems with Steve’s new appropriation of Luxemburg’s thought. I now contest a number of claims Steve makes based on this appropriation.

Claims about Marxism and Science

Steve claims that Marxism could be thought of as a science in the “golden age” of 1889–1914. As “that time is over,” Marxism “can no longer be construed as a science.” Of course it all depends on what you mean by science. What most Marxists meant by it in the period Steve selects, 1889–1914 (after Marx but before the First World War and Russian Revolution, the time of the Second International), was positivistic, crudely assimilating Marxism to the paradigm of the natural sciences and doing Marxism great damage in the process. However, why take that moment in Marxism’s history as some mark of Cain? Why view the collapse of those misplaced scientistic hopes as a collapse of Marxism per se? Why conclude that all socialists have left is “an ethical commitment?” The positivistic Marxism of the Second International had both particular economic and political conditions of possibility and many Marxist opponents. A very different Marxism emerged during and after the First World War and the Russian Revolution, the activist Marxism of Lenin, Luxemburg, Lukács, and Korsch. In the United States, Sidney Hook wrote an excellent book *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx: A Revolutionary Interpretation*. Published in 1933, Hook pointed out the “disastrous consequences” of trying to make Marxism an objective science “both in logic and historic fact.” Steve erases this bright shining moment in Marxism’s

history (quickly shut down by Stalinism) when a very different relation was established, in theory and practice, between Marxism and the human making of History. Hook argued that to reject the passive mechanical scientism of the Second International was to reclaim not reject the Marxism of Marx:

Lenin and Luxemburg appealed [to] scientific knowledge. But scientific knowledge was not merely a disinterested report of objective tendencies in the economic world but a critical appreciation of the possibilities of political action liberated by such knowledge. The spontaneity which the syndicalists exalted at the cost of reflection was not enough. Unless a militant ideology or theory directed that spontaneous will, its energies would run out in sporadic and futile strike tactics...economic development [can] only produce by its own immanent movement the presuppositions of socialism. Power is bestowed neither by God nor the economic process. It must be taken. When Marx spoke of communism as being the result of a "social necessity" he was referring to the resultant of a whole social process, one of whose components was the development of objective economic conditions, the other the assertion of a revolutionary class will...Economic forces and revolutionary organisation, Lenin insisted, are not related to each other as mechanical cause and effect but are independent components of a dialectical whole.

Marxism does not have to be an outmoded teleology or an economic necessitarianism. It has been before, and can be again, a theory and practice of human liberation.

Claims about the Working Class

Steve claims that "the industrial proletariat is on the wane" and "the labor movement is obviously no longer what it once was." However, we are living through the conjunctural political collapse of the two dominant forms of working-class politics: Communism and Social Democracy. We are not living through some postmodern "farewell to the working class." This is hardly comforting. However, it does tell us what the basic job is: the political reconstitution of a (globally gargantuan) working class as an independent political force. Hard

task it may be. Utopian, because of some systemic “waning” of the proletariat, it is not. There are dozens of countries in which the industrial working class is growing explosively—Turkey, Argentina, Brazil, China, India, South Africa, Thailand, Malaysia, and South Korea. Globally, there are more industrial workers in 2001 than at any previous time in human history. In addition, it is much more productive not just bigger.⁷ When Karl Marx published *Capital* in 1867 there were barely 250,000 trade unionists in Britain and very few anywhere else. Today there are 165 million trade unionists worldwide. The problem, I repeat, is a conjunctural one of political collapse, not a “waning” of the structural capacities of the working class.

Claims about Workers’ Councils

Steve writes, “‘actually existing socialism’ had its chance and little from history suggests that workers councils can either deal with a complex economy or guarantee civil liberties.” Steve also argues that the “liberal republican state” is the realization of “the institutional goal of the revolution initially sought by Luxemburg.”

Steve’s linking of the impossibility of workers’ councils to the failure of Stalinism in this way is unfortunate. It blurs the difference between Stalinism, an exploitative social system, which crushed all democracy, parliamentary or council, representative or direct, and the revolutionary Marxist tradition, which embraced workers’ councils in theory and practice. Also troubling is Steve’s comment that Stalinism and socialism “are not mutually exclusive.” I wonder if this risks undermining the struggle, practical and theoretical, of an entire historical tradition to preserve something more than radical liberalism from the wreck of Stalinism.

I am tempted to respond to Steve’s dismissal of workers’ councils with the question “how do you know?” for when were workers’ councils seriously tried only to fail due to some genetic weakness rather than counterrevolutionary violence? Blurring the lines between Stalinism and socialism tends to bracket this question out.

It is also misleading to say that the “liberal republican state” is the realization of Luxemburg’s political vision. Quotes do not resolve if she was right or adequate for today but they do establish what she thought. In *What Does the Spartakusbund Want?* we find, “The

essence of the socialist society is that the great working mass ceases to be a ruled mass and instead lives and controls its own political and economic life in conscious and free self-determination. Thus from the highest offices of the state down to the smallest municipality, the proletarian mass must replace the outdated organs of bourgeois class rule—the federal councils, parliaments, municipal councils—with their own class organs; the workers' and soldiers' councils."⁸

Luxemburg, like Marx and Engels, stood for the democratic republic. More than anyone, Luxemburg understood that only the democratic republic could give shape to the idea of "dictatorship of the proletariat" in a form compatible with self-emancipation. But she reminded Bernstein that "the poultry yard of bourgeois parliamentarism" could not be the means to achieve "the most formidable transformation of history, the passage from capitalist society to socialism." Appropriating the legacy of Luxemburg's thought would show how she struggled, and failed, to integrate both these insights amid the turmoil of war and revolution. For Rosa Luxemburg had the advantage over Marx of being alive to assimilate the fundamental lesson of the revolutions of the period 1917–23. Everywhere, the popular revolt reached a certain scale and intensity, councils or soviets or committees grew up alongside older representative democratic institutions. Hannah Arendt pointed out that the reason the history of these democratic forms has been ignored is that "wherever they appeared, they were met with utmost hostility from the party bureaucracies and their leaders from right to left, and with the unanimous neglect of political theorists and political scientists." She added, "Workers' councils, such as those in Russia in 1917, have for more than one hundred years now emerged whenever the people have been permitted for a few days or a few weeks or months, to follow their own political devices without a government (or a party program) imposed from above."⁹ The relationship of councils to parliaments became the subject of intense debate within the Marxist movement. These debates are often little known, let alone discussed. They offer no easy answers. However, based as they are upon the most advanced practical expressions of self-emancipation in human history, our task is to take the utmost care in their reclamation for the present. I doubt that casting the "liberal republican state" as the "realization" of Luxemburg's vision is adequate to this task. For the "liberal republican state" exists nowhere.

Whatever of its forms are preserved/transformed, the brute fact is that the “only” thing that lies between the actually existing liberal republican state (the one which serves the corporations and steals elections) and the democratic republic (the institutional form of popular sovereignty) is a revolution.

However, the institutional shape of the socialist polity is a radically underdeveloped area of Marxist political theory. To take just one example to illustrate the wider point, it is often thought axiomatic that Marxists support the ending of the separation of powers between legislature and executive. Actually, this was not accepted throughout the Marxist movement. Karl Kautsky’s writings in the years immediately following the Russian Revolution, for example, are a sophisticated Marxist argument for the indispensability of separation. And on the question of the administration of a socialist society, Kautsky’s thoughts might be useful additions to Lenin’s remark that “every cook can rule.”¹⁰ Revolutionary socialists should have the confidence to return to these debates, and to the ideas of the Left Mensheviks, ending all the intellectual bans and prohibitions we have inherited.

It is not for wanting to open up these debates that Steve should be criticized but for the opposite: closing the debate down by a rash dismissal of the potential of direct democratic forms to play a central role in both the transition and in the institutional shape of a socialist polity.

Claims about Capitalism and Socialism

Back in 1981 Steve usefully reminded socialists that “the liquidation of socialism as an *alternative* to capitalism through the emphasis upon particular reforms *per se* has resulted in an identity crisis for social democracy.”¹¹ Today, Steve claims that presenting socialism as a wholly alternative social system, as the other, is wrong (the italics, on both occasions are his). Again, Steve seems to be surrendering valuable theoretical positions for little return. The world is globalizing before our eyes but under the direction of multinational capitalist corporations and unaccountable institutions of global economic and political governance. It can seem guided by nothing more than moneymaking and ethnic violence. There is a global crisis of reformism. Socialism has never seemed more like the other to me.

Steve motivates this particular reversal by some sentences about “modern capitalism” and “the liberal state”:

Modern capitalism is no longer the system described by Charles Dickens. Its liberal state has been used to improve the economic lives of workers, foster participation, and provide the realistic hope for a redress of grievances. Luxemburg was wrong; the choice is not between socialism and barbarism.

Capitalist governments can ward off disaster by subsidizing industries, manipulating fiscal policies, and introducing welfare legislation.

Steve sounds curiously like Luxemburg’s old opponent Eduard Bernstein. Or the British Labor Party theoretician Tony Crosland in his book *The Future of Socialism*, written in 1956. But after Bernstein came capitalism’s own Thirty Years War. And after Crosland we had the end of the Long Boom to which he had pinned his socialist hopes, world economic crisis, a triumphant neoliberal campaign to drive down workers’ living standards, the steady erosion of the social wage, the desocial democratization of the world, and the squeeze on popular participation in decision making. In the United States, in 1997, 35.6 million people, close to one in seven Americans, lived below the official poverty line. Globally, obscene levels of inequality, murderous ethnic violence, war, and continued environmental catastrophe vie for the status of the social problem most likely to finish us off. According to the United Nations Human Development Report for 1999, income per person in half the countries of the world was lower at the end of the 1990s than at the beginning. Among those who live in developing countries (three out of four human beings) over half lack access to safe sewers, one in three lack clean water, one in four lack adequate housing, and one in five have no health services. In the face of all that Steve’s remarks about “modern capitalism” can sound rather like the Dickens character Mr. Podsnap, who, when asked about the good fortune of being an Englishman, replied:

“It was bestowed Upon Us By Providence. No Other Country is so Favoured as This Country...”

“And other countries,” said the foreign gentleman. “They do how?”

“They do, Sir,” returned Mr. Podsnap, gravely shaking his head, “they do—I am sorry to be obliged to say it—as they do.”

Against Steve’s intent I am sure, his new understanding of “modern capitalism” and “the liberal republican state” has a bit of Podsnappery about it:

“And Capitalism,” said the teleological Marxist, remorsefully, “It does how?”

“It does,” returned Mr. Bronner severely: “It does—I am sorry to be obliged to say it—in Every Respect Better. Its Liberal State is Literally Unsurpassable. Its Rate of Political Participation is Unmatched. The Integrative Power of its Welfare Services and the Adaptive Power of its Fiscal Policies renders it Hegemonic and Crisis-Free.”¹²

Elsewhere in his article, Steve himself indicts the barbarism of the world. The point is, for this reader at least, that this indictment sits at odds with the Podsnappish remarks about “modern capitalism” and the new theory of “the liberal republican state.” There are, I think, two incompatible positions, jostling.

Claims about Internationalism

Fourth, Steve recommends Luxemburg’s opposition to the call for national self-determination as a nationalistic demand that divides the working class. For all Steve’s concern for the dangers of a dogmatic Marxism unable to engage in the complex task of constructing contingent political majorities, he has embraced the most crude, dogmatic, indeed politically useless aspect of Luxemburg’s thought. Ironically, it is an aspect of her thought derived from precisely those elements within Marxism of teleology and determinism (“Luxemburg argued that Polish independence would only slow the progress of capitalist development, and thus the growth of the proletariat,” says Steve). What of the rich legacy of debates among, for instance, the early Bolsheviks concerning national oppression, national minorities, the right to self-determination, the question of federal political structures, and the relation of socialism to all of the above? These

discussions remain unsurpassed, by Marxists at least, to this day. Actually it's much worse than that. We are living through a kind of Grand Regression in which the sophisticated calibration of class and nation attempted by the Bolsheviks has given way to a Manichean view of the world in which the Great Satan in Washington clashes with various "objective anti-imperialists" from the strutting generals to the acid-throwers.

Steve is not a subscriber to that particular Grand Regression. However, he does risk a regression of his own with the claim that to favor national self-determination is to "endorse nationalism" and to "insist on the primacy of ethnic aspirations." But Lenin was not insisting on the "primacy of ethnic aspirations" when he argued that "when national oppression makes joint life absolutely intolerable then the interests of the class struggle will be best served by secession." Steve confuses the Zinovievist efforts to manipulate nationalism for socialist ends, especially in Asia, with Lenin's policy of "clearing the decks" for the class struggle by fighting for "consistent democracy." That policy—though we have to think for ourselves about how to apply it—is relevant today. There is no way past, through, or around nationalism other than consistent democracy married to socialist organization and politics.

Steve also claimed that "the only institutions capable of furthering internationalism are now intertwined with capitalist interests and they tend to privilege strong states over their weaker brethren." However, in the spirit of Luxemburg's internationalism, we should support the interventions of these "imperfect institutions" to prevent slaughter. I assume Steve means the UN and NATO.

The left does face excruciating dilemmas today, situations in which we lack forces on the ground and where the only realistic obstacle to slaughter is the intervention of the UN or NATO, or the armed forces of some bourgeois state or alliance of states. Take Rwanda. I might have tried to formulate the sentences opposing any intervention as "imperialist" but they would not take shape in my mouth. At least not without a feeling of shame. And yet, I also know that intervention can itself lead to a far worse slaughter than anything which prompted the intervention, as it has in Iraq. I also know that it will be other, progressive forces that will face "interventions" in the future, and that my support of any intervention will have extended legitimacy to the Big

Powers. The historic defeat of socialism may be the root cause of the dilemma, but what is there to do but wrestle with it? In the Falklands War, the Gulf War, and the Kosovan conflict. I thought socialists should be against both reactionary contenders. Rwanda seems to me to be a different case, and socialists should not have opposed all forms of intervention on principle. However, Steve, if I am reading him correctly, is not really wrestling with a dilemma. He is arguing there is no dilemma because the UN and NATO are “furthering internationalism” albeit “imperfectly.” However, it is one thing to say the saving of 1 million lives in Rwanda outweighs the need to deny any support to bourgeois state forces. It is another to issue a blanket statement that the UN and NATO are “furthering internationalism.” This is to turn Marxism upside down. It is certainly to forget some advice Luxemburg gave her comrades concerning the First World War: “Our party should have been prepared to recognise the real aims of this war, to meet it without surprise, to judge it by its deeper relationship according to their wider political experience.”¹³

Claims about Socialist Strategy

I agree entirely with Steve that the fight to protect threatened welfare benefits and democratic rights from rollback, and then to use that resistance as a springboard to fight for further reforms, is a key to socialist advance. I agree “revolution is no longer the issue in the western democracies.” That is just, for now, a fact. I also agree we must “seek new forms of alliances between workers and members of the new social movements.” Talk of “independent working class politics,” which defines itself by hostility to such social movements, is useless, not least because it misses the precondition of “independent working class politics”: the political constitution of the multiethnic and gendered working class as a unity-in-difference.

However, Steve seems to argue that these fights will take place “through the state” and through the “existing international institutions” or they will not take place at all. Again, despite his critique of Marxism as dogmatic I find this...dogmatic. Why not some combination of popular struggles outside coordinated with interventions inside existing democratic institutions? Isn’t that the most likely strategic line of march for any popular movement? In addition, as

representative institutions are dominated—utterly, absolutely—by corporate money power and the executive/permanent secret state, isn't it obvious that only a popular organized power outside Parliament could win reforms inside Parliament? And this is only to talk of reforms. When we talk of socialism as a new principle of social organization and a new society, and act on that talk, then the Marxist theory of the state, which the post-Marxists are not interested in, will become (to paraphrase Trotsky on war) very interested in them. As William Morris put it, at that point, "rather than lose anything which it considers of importance, it will pull the roof of the world down upon its head." The conjunctural weakness of our side, and the fact that revolution, because of that weakness, is not on the agenda, is no reason to forget basic truths gained at tremendous cost. In this case it is the knowledge that there is a structural unity to the capitalist order such that no sequence of reforms can peacefully change capitalism into socialism. The young Sidney Hook put it well:

The attempt made by "liberal" Marxists . . . to separate the existing economic order from the existing state, as well as their belief that the existing state can be used as an instrument by which the economic system can be "gradually revolutionised" into state capitalism or state socialism must be regarded as a fundamental distortion of Marxism. . . . For Marx every social revolution must be a political revolution, and every political revolution must be directed against the state.¹⁴

This need not mean an ultra-left rejection of reforms that would only isolate the Left. Indeed, we could do a lot worse than think about how to develop afresh for our own times the kind of transitional political strategy Ernest Mandel mapped in the 1960s, the strategy of structural reforms. This strategy was based upon the notion of coordinating a massive popular power, a network or coalition of forces, permanently organized to press its demands with a supportive block of popular elected representatives, ultimately a workers' government. Mandel aimed to update Marx's notion, developed in his own time by Trotsky, of a transitional political method in order to "effect an integration between the immediate aims of the masses and the objectives of the struggle which objectively challenge the very existence of

the capitalist system itself.”¹⁵ Today, a transitional political strategy would have to be based upon all popular struggles, and not only those of the labor movement, it would be led by a multiplex political coalition and not “the” revolutionary party, and it would, of course, be coordinated internationally. Perhaps something like this strategy has the potential to be the contemporary version of the mass strike; what Luxemburg called the “method of motion” or “phenomenal form” of socialist advance. Perhaps.

But what is sure is that in the ranks of post-Marxism we will only travel backwards, to the very beginning of the twentieth century when Luxemburg complained that Bernstein “transforms socialism into a variety of liberalism” and so “deprives the socialist movement . . . of its class character.”

Steve’s thoughts on Luxemburg strike me as hovering somewhere between these alternatives.

Notes

1. Stephen Eric Bronner, *A Revolutionary for Our Times: Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Pluto, 1981), p. 107.
2. For an example of the most thoughtful and rigorous legitimating theory, see the work of Norman Geras: *Literature of Revolution: Essays on Marxism* (London: Verso, 1986) and *Discourses of Extremity. Radical Ethics and Post-Marxist Extravagances* (London: Verso, 1990).
3. Steve also indulges in some caricatured presentations of “the Left” against which his implicit alternative is able to avoid scrutiny. For instance he insists we have to stop using the slogan “the worse the better” and we have to stop thinking that “intensified repression or exploitation will somehow automatically produce a progressive response.” It might be because I came into politics with Thatcher and Reagan but in over 20 years of activity in student unions, trade unions, the Labor Party, and more than one Marxist organization, I have not heard one person say anything like that. Ever. However, the idea that hordes of dogmatic Marxists are out there saying things like this all the time is central to the post-Marxist imaginary/mythology. The post-Marxist alternative that is hiding in the corner, hoping to avoid proper scrutiny, is the idealist idea that there is just no connection at all between capitalist crisis and the possibility of socialism.
4. Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Verso, 1976), pp. 122–24.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

6. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Workers Age Publishers, 1940), pp. 35, 38.
7. Paul Kellogg, "Goodbye to the Working Class?" *International Socialism* Vol. 2 No. 36 (Autumn 1987), pp. 105–11.
8. Rosa Luxemburg, "What Does the Spartacus League Want?," Dick Howard, ed. *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 368.
9. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1951), p. 159. Thanks to Marvin and Betty Mandell for this point.
10. See Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution, 1880–1938* (London: Verso, 1979).
11. Bronner, *A Revolutionary*, p. 111.
12. Apologies to the memory of E. P. Thompson from whose essay "The Peculiarities of the English" in *The Poverty of Theory* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978, pp. 36–37) this little jest is adapted.
13. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis in the German Social-Democracy," in Mary-Alice Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970). p. 279.
14. Sidney Hook, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx: A Revolutionary Interpretation* (New York: The John Day Company, 1933), p. 271.
15. Ernest Mandel, *A Socialist Strategy for Western Europe* (Nottingham: Institute for Workers' Control, December 1968).

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CHAPTER 3

A Second Reply to Stephen Eric Bronner

David Camfield

In his “Notes on the Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg,” Stephen Eric Bronner reflects on the question of the contemporary significance of the ideas of the thinker and fighter he calls “the most important representative of a libertarian socialist tradition inspired by internationalism, economic justice, and a radical belief in democracy.” At a time when the global justice movement is leading more people to question neoliberal—and, for some, capitalist—certainties and to search for alternatives, Bronner’s question is timely. His rejection of dogmatically “regurgitating the old slogans or finding the appropriate citations from her pamphlets and speeches” and his suggestion that the inadequacies of Luxemburg’s thought deserve to be treated much as Luxemburg critically appraised Marx’s work are praiseworthy.

However, Bronner’s argument—essentially, that it “no longer makes sense” to conceive of socialism “as the *other*, the emancipated society”—and therefore Luxemburg’s legacy for radical politics is a determined struggle for reforms—concedes too much. Certainly, a dogmatic reassertion of classical Marxism—even in its most intelligent variants—with a few minor innovations tacked on represents an inadequate response to the challenges facing radical political thought in the twenty-first century. But perspectives that underestimate the

extent to which liberal-democratic states are barriers to addressing exploitation, oppression, alienation, and ecological destruction, and which foreclose the historical possibility of human emancipation, are at least as wanting. I also believe that Bronner's article is inaccurate with respect to Luxemburg's ideas on two significant issues. I will begin with this last point, since it seems related to Bronner's view of Luxemburg's legacy, and then explain what I believe is the critical weakness in what Bronner proposes as a strategic direction for the Left. Finally, I will offer a different interpretation of Luxemburg's political legacy, which, I hope, does not shy away from confronting the major challenges facing those for whom Luxemburg's socialism continues to be a source of inspiration (as well as other radicals).

Luxemburg, Reforms, and Bourgeois Democracy

Luxemburg's role as a leading figure in the debate over "revisionism" in the Second International is well known. Bronner writes that her critique of Bernstein's theoretical expression of revisionism in *Reform or Revolution* "was based far less upon contempt for reform *tout court* than on her contention that an unqualified 'economism' undermined the revolutionary commitment necessary for instituting a republic." True, Luxemburg's position was (like Marx) one of fighting for reforms within capitalist society in ways that changed the participants and prepared for social revolution.¹ She did not contemptuously reject the struggles for tangible changes in which working-class people inevitably engage as a result of their conditions of life. Her withering intellectual dissection of Bernstein's work was not, though, primarily motivated by a concern that economism (restricting socialist politics to struggles for higher wages, better conditions of work, lower rents, etc.) was an obstacle to replacing the German imperial state with a republic. Rather, it was animated by her fear that those for whom the movement was everything and the final end nothing were abandoning the aim of replacing capitalism:

people who pronounce themselves in favour of the method of legislative reform *in place of and in contradistinction to* the conquest of political power and social revolution, do not really choose a more tranquil, calmer and slower road to the *same* goal, but a *different*

goal. Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new society they take a stand for surface modification of the old society... not the realisation of *socialism*, but the reform of *capitalism*: not the suppression of the system of wage labour, but the diminution of exploitation, that is, the suppression of the abuses of capitalism instead of the suppression of capitalism itself.²

Considering the actions of the Social Democratic Party and the “revisionist” current in Germany between 1914 and 1933, this was a prescient assessment.

Bronner notes that Luxemburg insisted that democracy had to be a “practical exercise” and that the socialist objective was institutions through which the working class could run society “without alienation or the impediments of bureaucracy,” such as the workers’ councils (soviets) first created in the Russian Revolution of 1905. He goes on to write that “Luxemburg foresaw how the communist suppression of bourgeois democracy in 1917 would unleash a dynamic of terror ultimately paralyzing the soviets and undermining public life.” Here Bronner conflates Luxemburg’s perceptive critique of early antidemocratic actions of the Bolsheviks in power, which she saw as hurting a revolution she whole-heartedly supported, with the stance of Karl Kautsky and other political opponents of the Russian Revolution. It was not the “suppression of bourgeois democracy in 1917” she criticized. She rightly did not see the unelected Provisional Government overthrown in October 1917 as a democratic regime of any kind. For Luxemburg, bourgeois democracy, where it existed, had to be replaced because it was insufficiently democratic. As Norman Geras has written, “she insisted that, in order to build socialism, the masses would have first to explode through that very framework of *bourgeois*-democratic institutions which both Bernstein and Kautsky wanted to preserve intact.”³ The goal was, in Luxemburg’s words, was “to create a socialist democracy to replace bourgeois democracy.” This had to begin

simultaneously with the beginnings of the destruction of class rule and of the construction of socialism... at the very moment of the seizure of power by the socialist party. It is the same thing as the dictatorship of the proletariat. Yes, dictatorship! But this

dictatorship consists in the *manner of applying democracy*, not in its *elimination*, in energetic, resolute attacks upon the well-entrenched rights and economic relationships of bourgeois society... this dictatorship must be the work of the *class* and not of a little leading minority in the name of the class.⁴

Bronner's claim about the "suppression of bourgeois democracy" is probably referring to Luxemburg's criticism of the Bolsheviks in her pamphlet "The Russian Revolution" for abolishing the Constituent Assembly. This, she wrote, "was decisive for their further position."⁵ Yet, here she did not criticize the Bolsheviks in the manner implied by Bronner. She was clearly an outspoken advocate of a thoroughgoing replacement of bourgeois democracy, which she saw as a form of capitalist rule. Her criticism in this case referred solely to the closing down of a democratic institution in a society in which she believed the dictatorship of the proletariat had been established, and the consequences of this action for the Russian Revolution. She believed it was, in Geras's words, "one manifestation of a certain carelessness towards democratic rights in general on the part of the Bolsheviks under pressure."⁶ In criticizing the Bolsheviks, never did she defend "bourgeois democracy." It is also important to note that after her release from prison, where she had drafted her pamphlet on the basis of the limited information available to her at the time, she concluded that her judgment about the closing of the Constituent Assembly had been mistaken.⁷

A Strategic Direction for the Left?

Bronner's article is not merely "Luxemburgology." It is to his credit that he accepts the challenge of critically assessing what the Left should take from Luxemburg's writings more than eight decades after her murder. It is his conclusion that is most debatable, rather than his decision not to simply assert the continued relevance of Luxemburg's work. For Bronner claims that because our times are so different from what he calls "the golden age of Marxism" between 1889 and 1914 (a remarkably one-sided way to view the heyday of the Second International, considering that its role in what transpired between 1914 and 1945 was prepared in the earlier period) that Luxemburg's

politics of revolutionary-democratic struggle for the self-emancipation of the working class are today nonsensical. He writes that “the industrial proletariat is on the wane; and the labor movement is obviously no longer what it once was.” Socialism as an alternative mode of social organization in place of capitalism is not relevant or even desirable, since workers’ councils could probably not run a “complex economy” or ensure democratic rights. There is no “serious alternative to the liberal republican state.” Socialism today is about “mitigating the whip of the market *through* the state and abolishing the exercise of arbitrary power *by* the state.” A reformist struggle against neoliberalism involving alliances between organized labor and other social movements and a fight to free international institutions from capitalist influence is what the Left should be engaging in.

What is most startling about this is that, in effect, Bronner concludes that the legacy of Luxemburg is in fact a principled updated version of the politics of Bernstein and the “revisionist” wing of the Second International before the First World War. Irony may be a hallmark of contemporary Western intellectual culture, but this is a remarkable convergence a century after Luxemburg penned *Reform or Revolution*.

There are a number of good reasons to question this conclusion. Above all, the liberal state upon which Bronner’s perspective ultimately depends is not a reliable vehicle for efforts to limit the power of the market. Mass struggles—such as those in France—have slowed neoliberalism’s dismantling of the social programs provided by the state. But it is increasingly evident that state power is an integral and active dimension of global capital’s offensive. Recent displays of undisguised violence against global justice demonstrators in several countries are merely an obvious example. More routinely, state power is used to force the unwaged to work in order to qualify for meager welfare benefits, to prevent migrants from crossing borders, and in a host of ways to monitor, fine, deport, evict, harass, imprison, injure, and kill people. In capitalist democracies, most of this coercion is legal and sanctioned by elected authorities, of whatever party; where it is not, unelected top officials are often able to do much as they please. This is so precisely because existing state power is *capitalist* state power. Its institutions have developed to politically administer societies in which class and other social struggles may be suppressed

or dormant but continue to reemerge (and sometimes win reforms) because people's needs are frustrated by capital, male supremacy, racial oppression, heterosexism, and other relations of domination exercised through "liberal republican" states as well as in other ways. As such, any limits to the market or the repressive exercise of state power are fragile, ultimately dependent on the mobilizing power of social movements in maintaining them.

While Luxemburg's view that "the present state... is a class state. Therefore its reform measures are not... the control of society working freely in its own labour process" is accurate, it is not an original contribution to state theory. But her revolutionary-democratic insistence on the failings and class character of capitalist democracy ought to inform the more sophisticated understanding of state power we need to formulate political strategy today.⁸ Of course, capitalist democracy undoubtedly remains preferable to more authoritarian forms of state power, and needs to be defended. Anything that limits the ability of the governments of the United States and other Western states to use international institutions such as the UN in their own interests ought to be welcomed, without suggesting that such institutions can free themselves of the state relations in which they are implicated. Building movements that put demands for reforms on liberal states in a capitalist world is vital. However, to my mind, this does not constitute an adequate strategy.

Luxemburg's Legacy: Another Interpretation

The weakness of working-class politics in the early twenty-first century is undeniable. As Bronner notes, Social Democracy and Stalinism have largely adopted neoliberalism. Yet, on a global scale, the working class is larger than ever. Those employed in manufacturing in the advanced capitalist states have been pummeled by capitalist restructuring, but the ability and propensity to struggle against capital was never the exclusive property of this one layer. In many countries, as writers like Kim Moody and Gerard Greenfield have shown, there are unions and community-based workers' organizations (including those of women and other oppressed people) that have made progress with the difficult task of discovering (sometimes rediscovering) methods of struggle that enable people to not just protest against capital's

agenda but to effectively combat it. Some organizations of peasants, indigenous people, students, and others have done the same. It is to these pioneering movements and struggles that we ought to direct our attention.⁹

Of course, few of these movements claim to present an alternative to capitalism or a strategy for realizing it, although—despite the political crisis on the international Left that reached new depths after the collapse of the Stalinist societies, which too few understood were not only nonsocialist but antisocialist—there are activists within them who are consciously anticapitalist. Although the weakness of independent working-class organization creates distinct problems, the growth and radicalization of the global justice movement presents an important opportunity to renew anticapitalist politics internationally. It is for this reason that it is especially worth debating Luxemburg's legacy today.

In my view, Luxemburg's legacy today is a socialist political strategy that takes as its starting point struggles, however small, in which working class and oppressed people assert their needs against employers, governments, and other establishments of domination. Building such struggles in ways that foster democratic self-organization, solidarity, and militancy makes for movements that are more effective at achieving tangible gains in the face of neoliberalism. Such movements are also more likely to be transformative for their participants, allowing them to develop and enhance their abilities to understand and change society. Such collective action can be conceptualized as conducive to building working-class capacities to act and think against and beyond capitalism.¹⁰ This is the indispensable basis for politics that are counterhegemonic, rather than just attacking the status quo, however spectacularly. Such an approach is also necessary because of the extent to which since the mid-1970s the working class in many countries has been decomposed. While they have not ceased to exist, many radical and militant working-class traditions have been seriously eroded, and workers' mass organizations weakened (this has included the strengthening of bureaucracy within them).

It is impossible to predict the future of the struggles and self-organization of the world's workers (urban and rural), peasants, and oppressed groups. Without doubt, we should not expect a cataclysmic "breakdown" of capitalism, as forecast in Luxemburg's *The*

Accumulation of Capital, and we should not hope for one. Economic crises are assured. However, this ought not to be seen as providing a sure ground for radical politics, since economic crises guarantee only intensified exploitation and suffering, not working-class advance and a crisis of class rule. In the early twenty-first century, teleological predictions that capitalism will inevitably or even probably be surpassed are intellectually unfounded and almost as unhelpful for a renewal of emancipatory politics as the fatalistic certainty that has become so widely accepted (whether with contentment or resignation) that capitalism is the unsurpassable horizon of humanity. For this reason, it seems to me that in the “post-Seattle” moment, we should fashion from the legacy of Luxemburg (and other liberatory thinkers and activists) a renewed politics of socialism from below, which starts from today’s struggles, refusing sectarianism and opportunism and spurning both certainty and despair in order to make more likely the future possibility of socialist democracy and the transcendence of the alienated social forms of market and state power.

Notes

1. This Marxist approach is concisely and eloquently restated in Michael A. Lebowitz, “Reclaiming a Socialist Vision,” *Monthly Review* (June 2001), pp. 41–47.
2. Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution* (London: Bookmarks, 1989), p. 75.
3. Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 160.
4. Rosa Luxemburg, “The Russian Revolution,” in Mary-Alice Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), pp. 393–94.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 384. Whether this assessment was accurate is debatable.
6. Geras, *Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 186. In my opinion, Geras’s analysis that Luxemburg’s prison pamphlet missed the point that the closing of the Constituent Assembly was “the liquidation of a bourgeois-democratic institution by and for a democracy of the masses” and that she in practice repudiated her earlier position by advocating in Germany a multiparty republic of democratic workers’ councils to replace parliamentary institutions is convincing.
7. “Rosa was never quick to change her mind. She was obstinate and had considerable confidence in her own powers of analysis . . . Possibly the only factual error to which she ever admitted was her support for a Constituent Assembly in Russia at the beginning of 1918” (J. P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* Vol. 2 [London: Oxford University Press, 1966], p. 718). According to Paul

- Frölich, “During the German Revolution Rosa Luxemburg completely corrected her views on this point and rejected the slogan upheld by the Independents [the Independent Social Democratic Party, commonly known by its German initials, USPD—DC]: Workers’ Councils *and* a Parliament” (Paul Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Work* [New York and London: Monthly Review, 1972], pp. 246–47).
8. Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, p. 41. Three notable relevant works on the state are Mark Neocleous, *Administering Civil Society: Towards a Theory of State Power* (London and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin’s, 1996); Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985); Werner Bonefeld and John Holloway, eds., *Global Capital, National State and the Politics of Money* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1995). James C. Scott’s *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998) contains much interesting material, although its theoretical framework is, in my view, weaker than that of the above-mentioned books.
 9. See the examples discussed in various articles in *Socialist Register 2001: Working Classes, Global Realities* (London, Halifax, and New York: Merlin, Fernwood and Monthly Review, 2000).
 10. See Sam Gindin, “Socialism with Sober Senses: Developing Workers’ Capacities,” *Socialist Register 1998* (Rendlesham, New York and Halifax: Merlin, Monthly Review and Fernwood, 1997), pp. 75–101, although I differ with Gindin’s specific suggestions for capacity building. Two recent attempts to develop strategy informed by this kind of analysis are Kim Moody, “The Rank and File Strategy: Building a Socialist Movement in the U.S.” at www.solidarity-us.org and “Working-Class Politics in the Canadian State 2000” at www.newsocialist.org/group.

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CHAPTER 4

Rosa Redux: A Reply to David Camfield and Alan Johnson

Stephen Eric Bronner

Among the assorted pleasures of writing for *New Politics* is the knowledge that so much of its audience actually reads the articles and intellectually engages them. But I found it particularly flattering when I received two responses to “Red Dreams and the New Millennium: Notes on the Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg,” originally delivered as a speech to the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Berlin, which appeared in the last issue. Admittedly, I was somewhat startled that the first response by David Camfield was roughly the same length as my short article while the second, by Alan Johnson, was even longer. Both are clearly serious in their intentions, however, and I would like to address their arguments in a sequential fashion. They overlap at given points, which may make for a bit of redundancy on my part, but proceeding in this way will allow me to deal better with the points they make and the logic they employ. Noteworthy about these replies is their political character, their lack of invective, and the conviction with which they argue their theoretical perspectives. It’s safe to say that we all stand on the left side of the barricades. But there are also some real disagreements along with some mistaken interpretations of both my work and, in my opinion, issues pertaining

to the socialist tradition. This makes a somewhat lengthy political response necessary. I hope the reader will bear with me.

* * *

Let me start with David Camfield. He begins by criticizing my claim that socialism should no longer be conceived as a utopian “other” to the status quo. In my view, however, such an assertion ultimately leaves the Left with nothing more than an indeterminate critique of the whole, which lacks both analytic power and popular appeal, unless an agent for realizing this “other” can be determined from within capitalism itself. This point of theory was shared by Marx and Luxemburg. It enabled them to link reform and revolution, socialism and democracy, and the growth of capitalism with the growth of its “gravediggers.” The question is whether the same assumption holds under contemporary capitalism and, if it doesn’t, what this implies for contemporary politics.

David, if you will permit me to use your first name, you completely ignore the type of ideological assumptions generated by the context in which Luxemburg was writing. It only made sense for her to think that the conquest of political power by the proletariat—or what Lukács would term the “objective potential” for that conquest—was inscribed within the workings of capitalism. Her belief was justified not simply by the remarkable growth in the numbers of the industrial proletariat,¹ but by the even more remarkable growth of its socialist parties—all ideologically subscribing to Marxism—virtually everywhere in Europe: German Social Democracy, for example, “polled 10.1% of the votes in the Reichstag elections (in 1887); in 1890, 19.7%; in 1893, 23.3%; in 1898, 27.2%; and in 1903, 31.7%.”² This continuing growth, in her mind, *ultimately* guaranteed the democratic character of the coming revolution. But things didn’t work out as Luxemburg had planned. Somehow, David, I don’t think you would any longer be willing to say with Wilhelm Liebknecht that “we can see the (socialist) future appearing as present.”

Just this certitude, which was understood in *scientific* terms, placed Luxemburg on the side of Liebknecht, Karl Kautsky, and Georgi Plekhanov in their attack upon revisionism. Without such certitude, which her contemporary defenders like to deny, socialism becomes

nothing more than a contingent enterprise and, therefore, necessarily based on ethical assumptions: this was precisely the position of Eduard Bernstein. I fully admit that the socialist “other” can usefully serve as a *regulative ideal* informing practical activity, but understanding the “other” in this way involves the realization that it can never be fully actualized. Simply *hoping* or *believing* in the eventual appearance of the socialist “other” without “objective” justifications is another matter entirely. That has less to do with Marxism and Luxemburg than with the construction of a religion and the prophecies of its priests. The leading force within the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer, was on the mark when he located the “longing for the totally other” within the religious realm.

Rosa Luxemburg was, by contrast, a materialist. Her critique of revisionism was indeed motivated by the fear that “economism” would result in abandoning the “final goal” of abolishing capitalism. But, first, she believed that realizing this aim was a *real* possibility—not simply an arbitrarily introduced utopia—and, second, that the abolition of capitalism would require a political revolution. We blithely throw terms like revolution around all the time. But Luxemburg knew what she wanted. And what she wanted was the same that everyone else on the Left wanted, including Lenin and Trotsky, in 1898. The “revisionism debate” in *practical terms* centered on whether to emphasize the establishment of a liberal *bourgeois* republic, which would enable the working class to secure its aims, become the majority, and act as a *socialist* majority.

To misunderstand this is to misunderstand both the character of the socialist movement and why it was able to rally all democratic forces on the continent during what Leszek Kolakowski termed its “golden age” from 1889 to 1914. The characterization is completely appropriate: there was not another period like it. During this time, under the banner of Marxism, the first democratic mass parties grew into a genuine political force. These *socialist* parties introduced a public sphere that we, today, can only envy. They raised the dignity of working people, they provided the vision of the modern welfare state, and they turned class consciousness into an international phenomenon. Never before or after would such a flurry of intelligent socialist literature appear on so many subjects with such tremendous mass appeal. The “great betrayal” of 1914, when socialist parties supported

their respective governments in the First World War, presupposed that there was something to betray.³

Perhaps I can use this occasion to challenge some cardinal points of orthodoxy concerning 1917 and its aftermath. The great moment was less the Bolshevik Revolution, which had already become an intractable and bloody party dictatorship even before the suppression of the Kronstadt Rebellion in 1921, than the establishment of republics with socialist majorities in so many nations of Europe where none had existed before. It was with them that a useful political legacy was created. It was with these republics that the process of democratic education took its first faltering steps. And the Weimar Republic was the most radical of them.⁴ Its base was a Social Democratic party that, like its sister parties elsewhere in Europe, was the *only* force on the continent that retained an ongoing commitment to both political liberty and economic justice in the interwar years. There is no straight line that leads from 1914 to 1933 or 1945.⁵ Indeed, while it's easy to criticize the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) for its commitment to a "republic without republicans," suggesting a viable alternative is somewhat more difficult.

With which movement or party in Germany would you, David, have worked during the 1920s and early 1930s? Liberalism was disintegrating and Communism was becoming increasingly authoritarian following the expulsion of Paul Levi in 1921. With the suppression of the Spartacus Revolt, and the reactionary radicalization of the middle strata and the peasantry, there was also not the least *practical* glimmer of hope for introducing councils. Whatever its vacillations, and timidity, Social Democracy was not the principal "cause" for the victory of fascism.⁶ It steadfastly resisted the totalitarianism of both Left and Right in the name of republican democracy and it produced the most radical welfare state of the time.⁷

By contrast, even today, what does the ultra-left have to offer? You would probably answer, while making a perfunctory nod to the preferability of the liberal capitalist state over more authoritarian forms of government,⁸ "socialist democracy." But, David, just what is that? The Paris Commune had already become anachronistic in the Western nations when Lenin and Luxemburg began to take councils seriously after the Revolution of 1905 in Russia. As for the revolts of 1919, they were less about the creation of a "dictatorship of the proletariat" or

even purely decentralized councils (*Raete*),⁹ than about a “republic of councils” or a “socialist republic.”¹⁰ The dividing line between these two ideas was fuzzy. But *either of them* would have differed from a “bourgeois” republic only insofar as its partisans would have hazarded the possibilities of civil war and/or invasion by the allies in the name of purging the old judiciary and civil service, splitting up the Junker estates in the North, and nationalizing some basic industries.¹¹ These were laudable goals at the time, and I like to think that I would have supported them. But they do not exclude commitment to a republic predicated on liberal principles and norms. Quite the contrary. The “socialist republic” (*republique democratique et social*) was understood from the first, that is to say from the July Revolution of 1848,¹² as an extension rather than as an abolition of the principles underpinning the liberal republic (*republique democratique*) introduced in February of that same year. The historical experience of this failed revolution ironically, or “dialectically,” led to the quite correct belief of the future that democracy in the form of a liberal republic must serve as the precondition for socialism, and not the other way around.

Speaking frankly, David, I think your critique of liberal democracy is deeply flawed. Not the institutional structures of liberal-democratic states, but rather the elites within those states, erect barriers to addressing exploitation, oppression, and ecological destruction. The abuses you mention testify to the existence of antiliberal elements within the liberal state, but they do not impeach its principles or even the way in which it should act. Liberal states allow for the expression of diverse interests. Reactionary elites can win out and, for any number of structural reasons, they often do. But this says nothing more, again, than that the achievement of socialist goals has no teleological or scientific assurances. There is, of course, an alternative approach in dealing with diverse interests. Squash them so that only the interests of “workers” can be articulated. In turn, however, this will require an authoritarian or totalitarian party standing above the rule of law. There is no reason to believe that the workers’ council provides a different solution to this problem or that it can dispense with the need for an independent judiciary or other bureaucratic institutions to safeguard the civil liberties of conservative critics and opponents.

Rosa Luxemburg found herself torn between republics and councils at the end of her life: she supported calling for a National Assembly in

Germany and yet, when her own motion insisting that the Spartacists should participate in it was defeated, she chose to stand with the masses when they rose in 1919. I have said on any number of occasions that the only justification for the Bolshevik liquidation of the Constituent Assembly was the belief that more radical institutions, namely soviets, would be instituted.¹³ That Luxemburg withdrew her original criticism of the Bolsheviks for abolishing the Provisional Assembly in Russia should, again, be seen in context. She was soon to become president of the fledgling German Communist Party, she wished to rally Western support for the Soviet Union, and she still (mistakenly) believed that the soviets or councils had a role to play in the homeland of the revolution. But you mention none of this. Thus, you confuse her tactical response to a single historical event with a point of principle that relates to her political theory.

What makes the political theory of Luxemburg *salient for the present* is not her retraction on the matter of the Constituent Assembly, which is why I didn't go into it in "Red Dreams," but her insight that terror always produces a dynamic that, once turned on, can't be shut off like a water faucet. Not in the section concerning the Constituent Assembly of her pamphlet "The Russian Revolution," but in the section titled "The Problem of Dictatorship," would she write: "But with the repression of political life in the land as a whole, life in the soviets must also become more and more crippled. Without general elections, the free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element."¹⁴

Doesn't this highlight the dynamic of repression? General elections and the free struggle of opinion, which naturally involves freedom of speech and assembly, are furthermore liberal "bourgeois" values. And, if that is not enough, her notion that "freedom is only and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently," crystallizes the equally "bourgeois" idea—underpinning the liberal rule of law—that the freedom of the individual cannot be arbitrarily subordinated to the whims of the state or the exigencies of any institution. In this regard, from its inception, the European labor movement chose to shoulder what I have called a *dual burden*:¹⁵ the commitment to liberal republican principles, which apply universally to all, and the particular class commitment to economic justice. Given the political weakness of the

bourgeoisie, in Germany and in most nations on the continent, it had little choice. Most socialist parties were initially forced to operate under monarchical regimes and it is no accident that revolutionary radicalism was always weakest where “bourgeois” democratic institutions and norms were strongest.

You say, David, that you are concerned with addressing “exploitation, oppression, alienation and ecological destruction.” You mention community-based workers’ organizations and speak about anticapitalist politics. But you don’t seem to draw any implications from your own admission that they have not articulated an alternative either in terms of the economy or more importantly, for our purposes, the liberal state. You say that you wish to limit the power of the market. But how do you intend to do this without legislation? I completely agree with you that mass mobilization from below, arguably even against the organizational interests of reformist parties, serves as a precondition for the introduction of radical reforms. And I also agree that your community-based organizations may be particularly transformative for their participants. Neither in their demands nor in their style, however, have these “mass struggles” or community-based worker organizations rendered the pursuit of legislative redress irrelevant or evidenced anything “other” than an *ethical* and *reformist* commitment to change. None of them to my knowledge either connects *revolutionary* theory with *revolutionary* practice or deals with existing problems in terms that make “bourgeois” democracy seem anachronistic. Your “other” hovers in the air without a foot in reality. It exists outside the famous “unity between theory and practice” that Marxism promised to provide. If you are content with that, well, fine. But I am not.

* * *

With this last point in mind, perhaps I can now turn to the criticisms of my friend Alan Johnson. I have always admired him as a writer, as a colleague on the editorial board of *New Politics*, and as an editor of the journal *Historical Materialism*. Alan’s reply to my article raises some important questions. It is also informed by passion and a profound political commitment. But that very passion and political commitment have, I think, led to some very strange conclusions about my

method and some fundamentally mistaken assumptions about my politics and values.

“Ransacking the legacy?” Alan, please! I didn’t arbitrarily chastise Luxemburg for this or that fault, and I didn’t treat her legacy as a smorgasbord. I tried to do to her precisely what Marx did to Hegel: that is to say provide an immanent critique of her understanding of economic development, political democracy, and internationalism. I engaged these *core concepts* of her work in order to develop a perspective more appropriate to the present. You may think, of course, that the commitment to immanent critique is a “banality.” But, if this is really what you believe, then how would you philosophically prevent any self-styled historical method from petrifying into a frozen transhistorical system? From your piece, in fact, I still don’t even know whether you wish to retain the teleological moment of Marx or not. It doesn’t help to speak vaguely about the need for a “creative confrontation with the present” unless you suggest how it should be methodologically undertaken.

Raymond Williams was a fine literary critic, in my opinion, but a very weak philosopher. And that is especially the case given the way you use him to justify the search for an “authentic Marxism” or, even more abstractly, “an authentic Marxist Marx.” I will come back to this. But I can tell you now that, from my perspective, thinking of this sort creates a barrier to progress. Fleetinglly you praise Korsch and Lukács, which is fine, but somewhat odd, since the roots of my general approach derive from them, along with various classical socialist thinkers including Luxemburg,¹⁶ and certain members of the Frankfurt School. What inspires me about Lukács and Korsch, however, is precisely their ruthless application of the critical method, or what is usually termed immanent critique, and their unrelenting emphasis upon historical context.¹⁷ There is no fixed goal, there is no institutional form, there is no particular claim, there is *nothing* that escapes criticism. Thus, Lukács threw down the gauntlet in the famous opening passage to *History and Class Consciousness*:

Let us assume for the sake of argument that recent research had disproved once and for all every one of Marx’s individual theses. Even if this were to be proved, every serious orthodox Marxist would still be able to accept all such modern findings without reservation

and hence dismiss all of Marx's theses *in toto*—without having to renounce his orthodoxy for a single moment. Orthodox Marxism, therefore, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the “belief” in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a “sacred” book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*.¹⁸

Passages such as this help explain why the “revisionism” of Lukács and Korsch should have been condemned at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern in 1924. Identifying orthodoxy with the critical method, of course, winds up ultimately destroying any form of orthodoxy. There is no place in Lukács and Korsch in particular, or critical theory in general, for “legitimizing theory” let alone—given their assault on reification and instrumental rationality—attempts to “balance” it with “operative” theory. The method of Lukács and Korsch inherently opposes the invocation of terms like “authentic” Marxism let alone an “authentic Marxist Marx.” No less than with Luxemburg, I applied the same form of immanent criticism to them, and my other favorite thinkers, that they applied to the icons of the past and the contemporaries of their time.¹⁹ This indeed is in the spirit of their enterprise.

Lukács, Korsch, and the partisans of critical theory recognized that innovation is impossible when *any* calculation is undertaken with regard to how different interpretations of the tradition in different historical situations correspond to some abstract notion of “authentic”—a term that, by the way, has religious origins and was made famous by Kierkegaard and later the existentialists²⁰—or “pure” Marxism. It is not simply that Marxism has “to be retrieved from layers of Stalinist filth”—who speaks this way any longer?—but, *more importantly*, of confronting the fundamental miscalculations and mistakes of Marx and other classical authors. Unless, of course, *they* are considered sacrosanct. But I have never had much use for holy scripture. Korsch knew what he was talking about in his classic work of 1923, *Marxism and Philosophy*, when he called for the rigorous “application of the materialist conception of history to the materialist conception of history itself.”²¹

But, Alan, there is more: How you get from your defense of an authentic Marxism to the heresy of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe baffles me. To suggest that my approach has anything to do with theirs,

moreover, is really quite bizarre. I haven't written anything about their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Any of my graduate students will tell you,²² however, that I am sharply critical of their naive valorization of social movements, their antiorganizational stance, their communitarian impulse, and their postmodern interpretation of Gramsci—whose ideas, including that of hegemony, also never had any significant impact on my thinking. As for “radical democracy,” Alan, you should know that I am one of the very few leftists who has offered an explicit critique of “democratic theory.”²³

A particular problem with “radical democracy” lies in its romantic roots: its earliest modern exponent was Rousseau. But there is also a romantic streak running through Marxism, which concerns me as much as any “economic necessitarianism.” I use it as a point of departure in dealing with Luxemburg. Alan seems to believe that his quotation from Norman Geras undermines my claims concerning her “revolutionary romanticism.” I believe it justifies my contention. The quote gives no hint about the importance of identifying the structural constraints in which revolutionary action takes place. There is no trace of organizational analysis in any meaningful sense of the term. Nothing is said about what institutional arrangements should be implemented when “the masses” become exhausted and leave the battlefield. Potential conflicts of interest between those classes comprising “the masses” are ignored. Then, too, there is no sense of what proved to be the disastrous costs of introducing the mass strike into the very different context of Germany or, putting it another way, just *how* one should “pose the question of power there in a serious way.”

Luxemburg got clobbered on the question of the mass strike and, in her stubborn insistence upon turning it into an “offensive” weapon, she helped split the German Left, diminish her own influence within the party, and pave the way not for Eduard Bernstein, but for the triumph of those genuinely right-wing nationalist, imperialist, careerist bureaucrats like Friedrich Ebert, who would lead the SPD into its “great betrayal.” The quotation from Geras provides nothing more than a defense of revolutionary will and voluntarism. It is as pure an example of political romanticism as one might find. If Luxemburg unified a theory of the bourgeois state, the character of proletarian democracy, and a viable socialist strategy—which I doubt she ever

did successfully—historical reality sundered the connection between them long before I picked up a pen.

As for the discussion about teleology, well, perhaps we disagree about the meaning of the word. It need not imply the victory of socialism, although I believe it did for Luxemburg, but *any result* inscribed within a developmental process. The ultimate breakdown of capitalism is a case in point. Now, with regard to that breakdown, let's cut to the chase: Does the development of capitalism generate its “gravediggers” or not? If not then socialism becomes a contingent enterprise or, putting it in the terms of the time, a purely “ethical” demand or project. Putting forward the abstract choice between socialism and barbarism, Alan, does not clinch your case. Quite the opposite. Every Marxist of the time knew socialism would *ultimately* prove victorious,²⁴ which enabled the *choice* to fit neatly into the teleological framework.

Luxemburg was not alone in pointing to the alternative between socialism or barbarism. It was raised every time a major crisis occurred and essentially ignored with respect to the final outcome of history. None of these crises presaged the end of capitalism. By viewing the choice in this way, however, orthodox Marxists could demand vigilance and commitment and yet retain the certainties of teleology. But there is a larger question. Is framing the choice in this way relevant any longer? History has shown that there are other alternatives between “socialism” and “barbarism” in any given moment of crisis. If “the collapse of capitalism is guaranteed, the victory of socialism is not,” moreover, the struggle for socialism again becomes contingent in character and “ethical” in form since its future success lacks any objective foundation. I don't think Luxemburg would have liked your interpretation.

Also moving from the claim, which Luxemburg indisputably made, that state terror retains its own dynamic to the claim that—therefore—I believe in the existence of a “simple continuity between Lenin and Stalin and between the revolution and the counter-revolution” not only evinces false causality, but attributes to me a position that I don't hold. There was no reason for me to develop an argument on Communism in my talk, since it was about Luxemburg, but the fact is that I wrote a very long chapter dealing with the connection between Lenin and his successors that completely contradicts Alan's assertion. Check it out.²⁵ I have always been anti-Leninist in orientation but, in good dialectical

fashion, I have also always maintained that the connections between Lenin and Stalin are marked by continuity and discontinuity on a number of issues. While all Leninist states have been authoritarian and repressive, I argue, Leninism does not *inevitably* lead to totalitarianism. But your cheerleading is woefully out of place. Leninism is as dead as a doornail everywhere other than among the sects that are reminiscent of antagonistic amoeba fighting each other to death in a drop of water. The “theoretical conquests” of the anti-Leninist and anti-Stalinist tradition were made less by ultra-left Bolsheviks than by the partisans of Social Democracy and critical theory.

With respect to nationalism, again, your critique is misdirected. I wrote in *Socialism Unbound* that Lenin was never a simple nationalist or a proponent of ethnic identity, and that his idea of national self-determination was tied to an internationalist vision. But, whatever one may think of it, his theory *assumed* the existence of a Communist party and an international organization that would serve as a corrective, or a break, on nationalist enthusiasms and channel them into socialist internationalism. To believe that nationalism will somehow turn into internationalism *without* such an organization is a perfect example of the pseudo-dialectical two-step.

Ideology, Max Weber noted in “Politics as a Vocation,” is not like a taxi-ride that can be halted at any corner. Uncritically supporting national self-determination without insisting upon liberal republican commitments has only resulted in more extreme expressions of both nationalism and authoritarianism. That is why I think that, while Luxemburg was perhaps politically less acute on the subject in her own time, she was ultimately much more prophetic than Lenin on the subject of nationalism. She understood that nationalism had its integrity, a logic and a dynamic of its own, and that it could not simply be manipulated by organizational whims. You want me to take Lenin at his word on the revolution. Why should I? Whenever a Communist party has identified socialism with industrialization, *which is all that it can do when the revolution takes place in an economically underdeveloped nation*, the result in practice, if not in theory, has been either authoritarianism like in Cuba or totalitarianism like in China. Should I have *faith* that it can be otherwise? You certainly don’t justify your belief by providing much history beyond 1917–23. And that’s a long time ago.

Don't take this the wrong way: I appreciate your kind words about Luxemburg and the Constituent Assembly. They serve as a useful corrective to David's view of my position. But I'm afraid that you don't draw the appropriate conclusions. Criticisms of Communist "mistakes" undertaken in the name of soviets, which never ruled the Soviet Union in the first place or had a realistic possibility of doing so, may produce interesting information, but in theoretical terms it is yet another indulgence in revolutionary romanticism. How about instead looking at the institutions introduced by Lenin, the mechanistic transformation of his theory of revolution into a theory of rule, his inability to imagine the constraints imposed by economic underdevelopment, his substitution of not simply the party for the class, but his identification of the party with the state, and his willingness to unleash a dynamic of terror that began with other parties, extended to other institutions like trade unions, impacted upon anarchists and socialists of good will, and ultimately wound up destroying every critical "faction" within the party itself?

You write that the "institutional shape of the socialist polity is a radically underdeveloped area of Marxist theory." No kidding! But then why not start dealing seriously with the problem by looking back to the vagaries of Marx and the sophistries of Lenin? The separation of powers endorsed by Kautsky, whose commitment to republican principles was unflinching,²⁶ by the way, is not exactly what you might call an intellectual breakthrough. It was already a mainstay of liberal republicanism and there is nothing in Kautsky to suggest that councils, which seek to overcome alienation by unifying the disparate functions of competing bureaucratic institutions, can better institutionally serve either the cause of economic justice or the defense of civil liberties than a republic.

You ask how I can dismiss the soviets when soviet rule has nowhere been tried. My answer is simple: because that's exactly what the Christians still say about Christianity. Its best and most radical offshoots, now lost in the mists of history, actually had more staying power than the councils. I have already suggested, incidentally, *not* that the liberal republic is the realization of Luxemburg's vision, but that at the end of her life she was torn between the republic and the councils. You don't mention any new ideas for resolving the tensions between them? I think I know why. Hardly a single serious theoretical

development regarding the council has occurred since the 1920s. Indeed, with this in mind, the belief that *I* am closing down the debate over republics and councils is ludicrous.

My work endorses experiments with “secondary” or “associative” organizations that might provide a more direct form of democracy, and I have even suggested that the council can be integrated into the liberal republican state.²⁷ But this is different from maintaining that the council can supplant the modern republican state. Embracing such a stance requires turning your back on political reality. That soviets have appeared for a few days or months whenever the masses have been in a revolutionary mood, does not exactly inspire me with confidence. It’s also time to squelch that myth propagated by Hannah Arendt about soviets arising in *every* revolution—unless you identify revolution only with those you like. There were no soviets in India, or in Algeria, or in Cuba, or in the majority of other revolutions that shook the non-Western world.

Without even a thought for any of this, however, you claim that the “liberal republican state exists nowhere.” But, if I recall correctly, the last great revolutions—of 1989—were undertaken not in the name of some fuzzy notion of democracy. They were instead undertaken in the name of liberal constitutional rule. I could, of course, be mistaken. In any event, let me ask you: Is there *anywhere* any mass-based political organization that is seriously talking about a revolution or the move from a liberal republic to a “democratic” republic? Where on the planet, right now, is the question of councils or *socialist* revolution on the agenda? Tell me, as someone who believes in a Marxist “science,” why I should trust your speculations on the subject without looking at reality? Should I—yet again—have *faith* that it can be otherwise?

Alan, from what I can see, your entire argument relies on *faith*—in councils, in revolution, in national self-determination, in socialism—that you dress up as “science.” In doing so, however, you misconstrue the purpose behind establishing Marxism as a science in the first place. Of course, it was “positivistic”! The idea was to provide the claims and predictions of Marx with an objectivity akin to the “natural sciences,” which are always to some degree “positivistic,” and thereby differentiate his new materialism from all forms of metaphysics. Sidney Hook—who attended Korsch’s lectures and used them for *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*²⁸—employs a rearguard action in his

use of “science.” He understands Marxian science in Hegelian terms: as a “science of consciousness.”²⁹

But such a stance undermines the very attack on metaphysics that “science” was supposed to provide since the times of Bacon and Kant. Unless a distinction is drawn between social theory and the natural sciences, which was the intent of Western Marxism and critical theory from the beginning, the door opens for some new version of the “dialectics of wheat.” Once the basic questions of methodology involving evidence and falsifiability arise, moreover, partisans of the “new science” usually have little to say. This is not the place for yet another discussion of how the attempt to create a “new science” degenerates into cosmology.³⁰ There is perhaps a way in which the Hegelian understanding of science might influence a “theory of liberation.” Nevertheless, this is not as easy as you make it sound.

If the use of “liberation” is not to result in yet another “banality,” then it must be infused with a bit more imagination than is exhibited here. A “theory of liberation” requires more than the incorporation of “economic necessity” with “revolutionary will.” Leaving aside the dualism, which incidentally can only be overcome if you privilege one or the other,³¹ such a theory must insist upon transforming each objective moment of the “totality” and the subjective *experience* of that totality as well. This will necessarily involve introducing psychology to analyze the dynamics of the family, theories of symbolic interaction to understand everyday life, existentialism to provide categories for explaining the experience of reality, and an articulated utopia—that goes far beyond platitudes about “participation” and the vision of an endless political meeting—in order to inform the project. But that is only the beginning. What will happen to your “authentic” Marxism—and your “authentic Marxist Marx”—when your theory finds itself being forced to integrate insights from Freud, Husserl, Heidegger, and a host of thinkers with very non-Marxist methodologies, but who have actually dealt with problems that can, at best, only be teased from the work of the master?

I believe we must become a bit more modest with regard to both Marxism and socialism. My critique of the old theory is really quite simple: I believe that the political moment must take priority over the economic moment of analysis, that the contingency of outcomes must be emphasized over any kind of “scientific” assurances, that

the ethical commitment to socialism must supplant any teleological understanding of its development. This philosophical position is, I think, warranted by historical reality. How it stands in accordance with orthodoxy, or whatever Alan understands by “authentic” Marxism, is irrelevant to me. By the same token: remembering the *real* achievements of the labor movement, the fight for time, and for the dignity of working people, gives *socialist* theory a hook in reality. It places modern socialists in an antitotalitarian tradition of *radical* reformism. It forces young people both to recognize structural constraints and the kind of struggle that was required to introduce what is so often derided as mere “legislation.” It creates the possibility for reconnecting theory with practice. And—most important—it raises a meaningful hope for socialist politics.

“Socialism has never seemed more like the *other* to me” sounds, by contrast, like a ringing endorsement of resignation and bitterness inspired by the failure of history and the labor movement to fulfill an inherently unrealizable desire. It seems, Alan, that the world has not measured up to your expectations. I understand your despair. Franz Biberkopf felt the same way in the great novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, by Alfred Döblin. This character found himself condemned to hell and, upon finally meeting the Devil, he asked why he was there. The Devil had a great answer: “Because you believed that reality was created for you.”

* * *

Much in this debate has taken us far afield from the basic points of what was originally a short speech with modest intentions. My concern was with suggesting that the institutional analysis associated with Marxism is woefully inadequate and that it is now less a question of whether to privilege reform or revolution than whether to privilege the commitment to social democratic reform or the neoliberal retreat from it. I sought to reinvigorate internationalism, rather than consider it as some sort of vague slogan or abstraction, by making reference to the only real international organizations that exist. In the same vein, I wished to provide a practical referent for socialism rather than leave it hanging as an “other” without concrete articulation or an agent to realize it. This does not mean that I have abandoned socialism, only

that I understand it in different terms. I don't identify socialism with any particular institutional form, including councils, and I view its purpose today less as the pursuit of some utopian "other" than as the ongoing creation of economic and political conditions in which working people can expand the range of their knowledge, their experiences, and their private as well as their public pursuits. My position is in accord with the intention of "The Right to Be Lazy" by Marx's son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, and the suggestion by my former teacher Henry Pachter,³² who was himself a student of Korsch, that socialism should be understood as "the highest stage of individualism—its realization for all."

There is no "final goal," in my opinion, only the asymptotic attempt to further freedom. And socialism has a role in that. But this requires a *concrete* understanding of its contribution. Over the last 20 years I learned we need a notion of socialism that is associated with what has been *concretely* achieved in the fight against capitalism and that retains a *concrete* sense of its original democratic impulse. This *concrete* sense, I believe, comes from identifying socialism with mitigating the whip of the market, embracing those movements and programs that helped foster that goal, and furthering democracy according to the most radical tenets of liberal republicanism. There is nothing in my thinking to suggest that unqualified support should be given to the United Nations or any other institution, only that the new transnational organizations will provide the arenas in which future struggles will be fought. That tensions—even unresolvable tensions—exist between the liberal republican state and the imperatives of global capitalism does not constitute a serious criticism. Tensions will always arise between global and domestic imperatives regarding both economics and politics. There is no reason to believe that the introduction of workers' councils will resolve them. Isn't it time to stop looking at the future through a cracked lens inherited from the past?

Alan and David both labor under the same misapprehension. My point was not to interpret Luxemburg, as David put it trenchantly, by transforming her legacy into the thought of Eduard Bernstein. I hate to break it to you both, but my philosophical stance is not his.³³ Just as there is more than one theory of revolution, there is more than one theory of reform. My view highlights the *class ideal* as a basic organizing tool of *socialist* politics: classical revisionism seeks the liquidation

of class identity in the name of a national party (*Volkspartei*) and trumpets the need for a “partnership” with other classes. My view underscores internationalism in theory and practice: classical revisionism basically presupposes a national form of political action. My view privileges the primacy of the political in fostering economic change: classical revisionism suggests that only with a “small minority” is it possible to consider noneconomic demands. My view calls for intensifying a “creative friction” between the organization and its clientele; classical revisionism is technocratic in its orientation. My view accepts the need for revolution, *though as a tactic rather than the strategic goal*, when working people are incapable of having their most basic grievances addressed or their democratic rights recognized: classical revisionism does not. My view emphasizes the dangers of an “ideology of compromise”: classical revisionism generates a position in which compromise is an end unto itself. My view worries over the degeneration of the reformist impulse: classical revisionism retained an unwavering belief in “evolutionary socialism.” In all these ways, I consider myself informed less by the spirit of Eduard Bernstein than by the spirit of Rosa Luxemburg.

The lesson of historical materialism is that it must be used in a historical way with respect to both means and ends: it must deal with the situation as it exists. I never said that the working class was shrinking worldwide or that poverty was being eradicated in global terms; I have even said it's quite possible that many of Marx's economic predictions may turn out to be true. But I maintain that there is no longer any necessary translation of this economic development into *political power* and that, in turn, the power of capital still rests on the degree of *organizational* and *ideological* disunity among workers. If the two of you think that defrosting an institutional vision from the last century is the way to build this organizational and ideological unity, or that we can begin with the old assumption that “workers have nothing to lose but their chains” . . . well . . . good luck.

Keep defining “socialism” as you want without reference to the broader history of the labor movement. Keep maintaining that there is *no* connection between Leninism and Stalinism. Keep your anachronistic notions of national self-determination and workers' councils. Keep your irrelevant view of “science.” Keep your insular beliefs. But then, when you glance at the world, perhaps you will consider: Is

everything simply “false consciousness?” Was everyone an idiot except your “tiny minority,” who still knows everything better, but to whom no one ever listens? Perhaps you will begin to think about why?

A great work of literature could provide a clue. I enjoyed how Alan used Charles Dickens to satirize me and now, in closing, perhaps I can be permitted to offer something equally satirical of you both from *A Tale of Two Cities*. I trust each of you knows the passage and I also trust that each of you will get the point:

The leprosy of unreality disfigured every human creature in attendance upon Monseigneur. In the outermost room were half a dozen exceptional people who had had, for a few years, some vague misgiving in them that things in general were going rather wrong. As a promising way of setting them right, half of the half-dozen had become members of a fantastic sect of Convulsionists, and were even then considering within themselves whether they should foam, rage, roar, and turn cataleptic on the spot—thereby setting up a highly intelligible finger-post to the Future, for Monseigneur’s guidance. Besides these Dervishes, were other three who had rushed into another sect, which mended matters with a jargon about “the Centre of Truth”: holding that Man had got out of the Centre of Truth—which did not need much demonstration—but had not got out of the Circumference and that he was to be kept from flying out of the Circumference, and was even to be shoved back into the Centre, by fasting and seeing of spirits. Among these, accordingly, much discoursing with spirits went on—and it did a world of good which never became manifest.³⁴

Notes

1. Marx fused three different moments in his conception of class: the empirical (which meant the industrial proletariat), the structural (those who sell their labor power), and the normative or political (class consciousness). I believe these three moments have fallen asunder, and that it is the normative, or ethical element, that needs to be pushed into the foreground. For a more encompassing analysis, see Stephen Eric Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, 2nd Edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 11ff.
2. Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy, 1905–1917* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955), p. 7.

3. The decision of Social Democracy to support the war must be understood, not excused, but understood in terms of what are today a set of forgotten constraints. Note the chapter titled, "In the Cradle of Modernity: The Labor Movement and the First World War" in Stephen Eric Bronner, *Moments of Decision: Political History and the Crises of Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 13ff.
4. "The legend of Weimar's intelligentsia has grown like ivy over the fallen pillars of the Weimar state. But that state—which today is still the object of historiographical opprobrium—may one day share the fate of its world-renowned citizens; posterity may revise the judgment of those contemporaries who attribute all the glory of Weimar to its adversaries and all the infamy to the Republic." Henry Pachter, "The Intellectuals and the State of Weimar" in *Weimar Etudes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 109.
5. The old stalwarts of German Social Democracy were not in control of the party when its members chose to support their nation in the First World War, and they were not even in the party when Friedrich Ebert and Gustav Noske (also known as the bloodhound) conspired with reactionary forces in the suppression of the Spartacus Revolt. Bernstein, Eisner, Haase, Kautsky, and most of their comrades had broken off in 1917 to form the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) over opposition to the war and the role of councils. The SPD and the USPD only reunited in 1922 when the councilist movement had clearly been defeated. See the classic study by David W. Morgan, *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution: A History of the Independent Social Democratic Party, 1917–22* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).
6. See the chapter, "Working Class Politics and the Nazi Triumph" in Bronner, *Moments of Decision*, p. 33ff.
7. Note the illuminating studies by Gerd-Rainer Horn, *European Socialists Respond to Fascism: Ideology, Activism and Contingency in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), and William David Jones, *The Lost Debate: German Socialist Intellectuals and Totalitarianism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).
8. It was precisely this kind of resigned and cynical lack of conviction in the value of republican institutions so prominent among the "liberal" intelligentsia of Weimar Germany, popularly known as *Vernunftrepublikaner*, which reinforced the "unpolitical" values of the German bourgeoisie and simultaneously helped undermine loyalty to the regime and its republican principles. On the background, see Fritz Stern, "The Political Consequences of the Unpolitical German" in *The Failure of Illiberalism: Essays on the Political Culture of Modern Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 3–25.

9. Ironically, with reference to the claims of David Camfield, the principal supporter of the council movement was the USPD, whose members included the original mainstays of the social democratic movement. See the excellent analysis of the council movement by Henry Pachter, "Was Weimar Necessary? The *Raete* Movement, 1918–21, and the Theory of Revolution" in *Weimar Etudes*, p. 285ff.
10. Sebastian Haffner, *Failure of a Revolution: Germany 1918–1919*, trans. George Rapp (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986), pp. 51ff and 106ff.
11. Arthur Rosenberg, *Geschichte der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt: Europaesche Verlagsanstalt, 1961), p. 5ff.
12. Karl Marx, "The Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* 3 vols. (Moscow: International Publishers, 1969), 1:186ff.
13. Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, p. 139ff.
14. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution," in Mary-Alice Waters, ed. *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (Pathfinder: New York, 1970), p. 391.
15. Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, p. 2ff.
16. Forgotten is my original claim, to which I still subscribe, that Luxemburg provided the basic impulse for the Western Marxism wherefrom critical theory emerged. See the first printing of Stephen Eric Bronner, *Rosa Luxemburg: A Revolutionary for Our Times* (London: Pluto Press, 1981), p. 96ff.
17. With respect to the revisionism debate, for example, they were clear about the ways in which the defenders of orthodoxy—including Luxemburg—missed what was really at stake. Thus, Korsch could write: "Rosa Luxemburg did not direct her critical counterattack against the Social Democratic *practice*, but against Bernstein's theory, which was nothing more than a truthful expression of the actual character of that practice." Douglas Kellner was completely accurate in claiming Korsch understood this misdirected approach as contributing to the "crisis of Marxism." See Karl Korsch, *Revolutionary Theory*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), pp. 179–80 passim; in a similar vein, see, Georg Lukács, "Bernstein's Triumph: Notes on the Essays Written in Honour of Karl Kautsky's Seventieth Birthday" in *Political Writings, 1919–29*, ed. Rodney Livingstone and trans. Michael McColgan (London: New Left Books, 1972), p. 127ff.
18. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972), p. 1.
19. Stephen Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 12–62 passim.
20. The concern with authenticity is implicitly developed by St. Augustine while the term itself derives from Angelus Silesius, who wished to know

- whether any given “revelation” from God could be trusted. Sound familiar? I happen to know this piece of trivia because my dissertation dealt with precisely this concept. Stephen Eric Bronner, *Authenticity and Potentiality: A Marxian Inquiry into the Role of the Subject* (PhD Dissertation, Berkeley: University of California, 1975).
21. Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Halliday (London: New Left Books, 1970), p. 92.
 22. My emphasis upon a class ideal, which is articulated in most of my books, can be seen as a response to Laclau and Mouffe. The concept clearly influenced the fine work by my former doctoral student Christine A. Kelly, *Tangled Up in Red, White and Blue: New Social Movements in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).
 23. See the chapter entitled “The Dilemmas of Democratic Theory” in Stephen Eric Bronner, *Ideas in Action: Political Tradition in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), pp. 17–25 *passim*.
 24. The classic work on this question has, unfortunately, still not been translated into English. See Max Adler, *Kausalitaet und Teleologie im Streit um die Wissenschaft in Marx-Studien* vol. 1 (Vienna, 1904).
 25. Note the chapter “Leninism and Beyond” in Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, pp. 77–121.
 26. See the chapter “Karl Kautsky: The Rise and Fall of Orthodox Marxism” in *ibid.*, pp. 33–53.
 27. Note the section “The Battle for Democracy” in Bronner, *Ideas in Action*, p. 306ff.
 28. Sidney Hook “did not know enough German to understand everything. He sat next to me in a private course which Korsch gave in 1930. I believe on his return to the United States, Hook published a reasonable account of Korsch’s views on Marxism.” The book in question is *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*. See the chapter titled “Autobiographical Fragments” in Pachter, *Weimar Etudes*, p. 39.
 29. The inspiration derived from Lukács and Korsch who directly criticized the attempt to extend the dialectical method to nature. The former approvingly noted the comment of Vico that the difference between history and nature results from the fact that human beings have made the one, but not the other. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, pp. 112 and 24; also see the pamphlet by Karl Korsch, *Kernpunkte der materialischen Geschichtsauffassung: Eine quellenmaessige Darstellung* (Hamburg, 1973 ed.).
 30. Note my debate with Loren Goldner, “The Enlightenment: An Exchange,” *New Politics* Vol. 6 No. 1 (Summer 1996), p. 137ff.
 31. Lukács attempted to deal with the problem when, in the chapter titled “The Changing Function of Historical Materialism,” he wrote: “For the proletariat fought capitalism by forcing bourgeois society into a self-knowledge which would inevitably make that society appear problematic to itself.

Parallel with the economic struggle is a battle fought for the consciousness of society. Now, to become conscious is synonymous with the possibility of taking over the leadership of society." Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 228.

32. See the wonderful essay "The Right to Be Lazy" in *Socialism in History: Political Essays of Henry Pachter*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 3ff.
33. Note the chapter "Eduard Bernstein and the Logic of Revisionism" in Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, p. 55ff.
34. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Grosset & Dunlap: New York, 1948), p. 133.

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CHAPTER 5

Why Should We Care What Rosa Luxemburg Thought?

Paul Le Blanc

Rosa Luxemburg—passionate tribune of socialism, penetrating Marxist theorist, and educator whose luminous prose has inspired millions, revolutionary activist martyr. What are we to make of her now?

In *The Marxists*, C. Wright Mills wrote that Luxemburg “occupied a peculiar, and powerless, position between the Second and the Third Internationals.” Because she was “passionately for democracy and for freedom in all of the decisive meanings of those terms,” Mills explains, and because this was fused “in her belief in the revolutionary spontaneity of the proletarian masses,” she should be seen as having one foot in the Socialist International, the other foot in the Communist International, “and her head, I am afraid, in the cloudier, more utopian reaches of classic Marxism.” If someone was so disconnected from the hard realities of her own time, why should one care what she might have thought about the complexities of ours?

Hannah Arendt’s marvelous essay on Rosa tells us that Luxemburg has been so important to so many because she after her death she became “a symbol of nostalgia for the good old times of the movement, when hopes were green, the revolution around the corner, and, most important, the faith in the capacities of the masses and

in the moral integrity of the Socialist or Communist leadership was still intact.” Arendt adds that “it speaks not only for the person of Rosa Luxemburg, but also for the qualities of the older generation of the left, that the legend—vague, confused, inaccurate in nearly all details—could spread throughout the world and come to life whenever a ‘New Left’ sprang into being.” But she concludes by insisting on the continuing relevance of Luxemburg’s actual ideas, expressing the hope “that she will finally find her place in the education of political scientists in the countries of the West” (and presumably the East, the North, the South), since—according to Luxemburg’s biographer J. P. Nettl, whom she quoted—“her ideas belong wherever the history of political ideas is seriously taught.”

Stephen Eric Bronner, it seems clear, inclines very much toward this view. And he seems admirably determined not to allow what is valid in Luxemburg’s thought and life to be lost in the clouds of utopianism or the fog of nostalgia.

I have not read enough of Bronner’s writings. His small book on Rosa Luxemburg is not bad, though I differ with some of the interpretation. (But for me, no one has matched Rosa’s comrade Paul Frölich’s classic biography of her.) I have read Bronner’s edition of Rosa Luxemburg’s letters, which is incredibly fine, and while Luxemburg may deserve most of the credit for that, I feel genuine gratitude for Bronner’s valuable selections, editing, notes, and introductory essay. And I have read his warm and illuminating essay on his teacher Henry Pachter, a very thoughtful one-time follower of Luxemburg, who passed through Communism to the Social Democracy of Irving Howe’s *Dissent*.

But after reading his self-defense in response to the criticisms of Alan Johnson and David Camfield, I will certainly want to look at the other works Bronner mentions throughout his footnotes—*Socialism Unbound*, *Moments of Decision*, *Ideas in Action*, etc. First of all, because here is an intelligence that is wonderfully steeped in the Marxist tradition and the history of the socialist movement. But it is also an intelligence so obviously humane, alert, critical, that one is compelled (if the reader is to do justice to himself or herself) to open one’s mind in a manner that undermines dogmatic interpretations of valued beliefs. This is so even if one differs with the author’s conclusions.

This is why I liked his essay “Red Dreams and the New Millennium: Notes on the Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg.” It constituted a genuine challenge for us to consider the contemporary relevance of Luxemburg, and it truly helped to bring her alive. *I think she herself would not have accepted important aspects and assumptions of the argument.* But I liked it. Because what is more important than what Rosa Luxemburg would have thought of Bronner’s essay is the extent to which it identifies real issues and real problems facing us. She lived and wrote and acted in a context in which mass working-class movements throughout Europe were animated by socialist ideas and history crackled with revolutionary possibilities. It is silly to allow ourselves the daydream—when we read her words or think about her life—that this defines our own reality. So what *is* Rosa’s legacy for us? Good question!

The Debate...and the Stakes

And then in the next issue of *New Politics*, thanks to Johnson and Camfield, there were not one but two critiques—twenty pages of critique to the original six pages of Bronner’s talk—defending Luxemburg’s revolutionary Marxism against the revisionist offender. The critiques were comradely in tone, as Bronner acknowledged in his seventeen-page rejoinder that—in a comradely tone—lambasted his critics.

Why on earth would I be wandering into this debate on Rosa Luxemburg?

In part, the answer is that I want to help these people stop fighting. It seems to me the comrades are—to a certain extent—arguing past each other: too much learning, too much knowledge, too many fine-turned phrases getting in the way of identifying what’s really what in the world and how they see the world. It isn’t clear to me to what extent—in life, in practical politics—they actually disagree.

In part, the answer is that they are differing over more than the legacy of Rosa Luxemburg. A little bit in his first contribution but somewhat more in his second, Bronner seems to raise issues having to do with the continuing relevance of Marxism and the possibility of socialism. Since so much of my own life has been animated by a belief in such relevance and such a possibility, I find myself drawn to

the debate like a moth to a nighttime porch light. Especially since a majority of those who used to think the way I did now seem not to. This is hardly the first time.

Once upon a time, I belonged to a relatively small would-be revolutionary party that was in trouble. It was larger than any would-be revolutionary group existing in the United States today, and the trouble it was in was that—despite some very good work it had done (in part, *because* of some very good work it had done), it was sinking under the weight of its own unrealistic expectations. There was full freedom of discussion in the organization and the right to dissent from the party leadership, but—especially under the circumstances—anyone who seriously made use those rights risked, at the very least, undermining his or her position as a respected comrade. What’s worse, at a certain point the party leadership decided (in a manner neither open nor honest) to replace one set of party dogmas with another set of party dogmas. There were many contradictions, many confusions, many foolish and wrong things being said and done. I would sit in meetings, wanting to continue making my own modest contributions to the revolutionary party and remain everyone’s friend, gritting my teeth, saying to myself: “Don’t be a fool, don’t say anything, don’t go looking for trouble, don’t say anything, let it go, don’t say anything.” And then like a fool I would open my mouth and disagree with the majority position.

Nor is my problem simply still agreeing with Luxemburg. The majority dogma among radicals today, for example, is certainly what Bronner writes: “Leninism is as dead as a doornail everywhere other than among the sects that are reminiscent of antagonistic amoeba fighting each other to the death in a drop of water.” Good heavens! And here I am, still considering myself a Leninist. What an embarrassment. But this may be as good a place as any to explain myself. I still consider myself a Leninist because, in large measure, I consider authentic Leninism to include a commitment to the following propositions:

- capitalism is inherently a vicious, exploitative, oppressive, dehumanizing system which should be replaced with socialism—rule by the people over the economy, the free development of each being the condition for the free development of all;

- in modern capitalist society it is the working class (not simply “factory workers,” but all those individuals and their families dependent on the sale of one’s ability to work for a paycheck) that is in the process of becoming a majority class and potentially has the power to bring great changes;
- socialism and the working class must be merged if the possibility of the one and the potential of the other, and the triumph of both, are to be realized;
- mass struggles for reforms that advance economic justice and democratic rights are necessary in and of themselves but are also important as the basis for the serious struggle for socialism—both because this is a training ground for working-class activists capable of making socialism a reality, and because capitalism ultimately is incapable of providing actual economic justice and genuine democracy;
- under modern-day capitalism, the state—even in the form of the more or less *democratic republic*—necessarily reflects, and is necessarily structured to reflect, the power and the needs of the capitalist economy and of the most powerful sectors of the capitalist class; while partial gains for the workers and oppressed must be fought for and can sometimes be secured within that context, a genuinely democratic republic that truly reflects the needs and power of the working-class majority will require a fundamental restructuring—a radical democratization—of the structure of the state;
- from the very beginning, capitalism was expansive and global—seeking markets, raw materials, and investment opportunities regardless of national and other boundaries—and this aggressive expansionism is intertwined with the policies and structures of the modern-day state, constituting the imperialism of our time: often peaceful when possible, but murderous when necessary, often expressed with the rhetoric and gestures of profound humanitarianism, but always shaped to harmonize with the ability of capitalist power elites to overcome all impediments to the maximization of their profits;
- just as capitalism is a global system, so is the exploitation of those who labor throughout the world an international reality, which means that the workers of all countries and regions,

instead of competing against each other, need to work together; such working-class internationalism will mean the mutual strengthening—through shared experiences and insights—of working-class liberation forces in each country, and victories in one sector of the world will, quite substantially and materially, make possible victories in other parts of the world for workers and oppressed people;

- the layers of politically advanced, activist layers of the working class (the vanguard), must organize themselves into a coherent socialist organization, a party that is not only democratic but also disciplined, that—with its leaflets, newspapers, and other literature, its study circles and mass meetings, its demonstrations and trade union efforts, its reform struggles and election campaigns, and ultimately its mass mobilizations and confrontations with the powers-that-be—will be capable of accumulating and sharing with more and more workers a blend of practical political experience and the knowledge and analyses associated with Marxism, ultimately helping the working class to take political power;
- socialism will, finally, not be brought about simply through the slow and steady gathering together of an electoral and parliamentary majority—in fact a powerful majority capable of establishing working-class political power and the socialist reconstruction of society can only be forged through militant, dynamic, revolutionary struggles that will confront and overcome capitalist power structures in the workplaces, the communities, and the political arena.

There are a couple of points to be made here. One is that this is not just Leninism. There is ample material to demonstrate (including my own books, *From Marx to Gramsci* and *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* and *Rosa Luxemburg: Reflections and Writings*) that the perspectives outlined here are hardly the exclusive property of Lenin. They were broadly accepted—more or less—by all in the revolutionary Marxist tradition, starting with Marx and Engels themselves, also embracing Trotsky and Gramsci, and certainly including Luxemburg. One could add that Luxemburg's thought also contains vitally important criticisms of Lenin's practice—criticisms that are essential for any revolutionary socialism, including Leninism, which seeks to learn

from the mistakes of revolutionary socialists. But Luxemburg and Lenin saw themselves, and they remain, partisans of the same set of commitments.

Yet simply because all the holy names in the revolutionary Marxist pantheon said something is true, does that make it true? Maybe it *was* true once long ago when these people were still alive. Does that make it true now? This is precisely Bronner's challenge to us.

Capitalism, the State, and Imperialism

Which brings me to my second point. We should care what Rosa Luxemburg thought because so much of her thought continues to be relevant to the capitalist realities in which we find ourselves enmeshed. Setting aside this rhetorical flourish and that overly optimistic or pessimistic error, the basic critique of capitalism—economically, socially, politically—still holds up all too well.

That is why I have a problem with some of the key assertions in Bronner's challenge. In his second article he tells us that "a liberal republic" structured along the lines of the United States "must serve as the precondition for socialism." He asserts that "not the institutional structures of liberal-democratic states, but rather the elites within those states, erect barriers to addressing exploitation, oppression, and ecological destruction." I am not in favor of our simply turning our backs on the "bourgeois-democratic" state. To the extent that it is democratic, that is a precious acquisition for all of us, and especially for the working class, and we should struggle for reforms within that context. But we should not blind ourselves to the fact that "the Founding Fathers" (and all of the politically powerful "fathers" who have come since) really did—quite consciously—structure the American Republic in order to protect and advance the interests of the market economy and of those who possess great wealth and property. It is wrong for Bronner, in the name of going beyond Marxist dogma, to pretend that this isn't so.

Worse, in his first article he says this: "The only institutions capable of furthering internationalism are now intertwined with capitalist interests and they tend to privilege strong states over their weaker brethren. But I think Luxemburg would have realized that the choice between furthering relatively progressive ends through imperfect

institutions and not intervening in order to forestall genocide in Rwanda or Sierra Leone is self-evident.”

It is important to look at the actual history of the world over the past hundred years to avoid making naïve mistakes. There have been many imperialist military interventions which principled socialists have actively opposed—from the Spanish American War and the invasion of the Philippines, to the First World War, to US intervention in Vietnam, to the various interventions in Central America and the Caribbean, to the bombing of innocents in Afghanistan. On the other hand, it can be argued that there are other military interventions against which it would have been wrong to mobilize. A classic case was the US war effort against Nazi Germany in the Second World War. One could, perhaps, identify other possible examples in recent times.

But there is a difference between not organizing an antiwar movement and actually mobilizing for war. Should one give political support to interventions by (or advocate interventions to be carried out by) what is essentially an imperialist war machine? Such historians as William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko, Lloyd Gardner, and Walter LaFeber have demonstrated that US foreign policy in 1941–45 was inseparable from the imperial commitment to “the Open Door Policy” and to establishing “the American Century” at the expense of the world’s peoples. It should be clear that imperialist “humanitarianism” will certainly be a pretext for the primary goal: maintaining an imperialist world order in which, for example, the richest 20 percent of the world’s population receives 82.7 percent of the total world income, the world’s 225 richest people have a combined income which is equal to the combined annual income of the world’s 2.5 billion poorest people, and 40,000 of the world’s children die of malnutrition each day.

Bronner is wrong to speculate that the Rosa Luxemburg we know would have agreed with his support of certain imperialist interventions. It was alien to all that she said, all that she did, all that she was. That hardly settles the matter. It is not important that Rosa Luxemburg would disagreed with Stephen Eric Bronner if all that shows us is her inability to transcend her revolutionary socialist “dogmatism.” (Of course, I think she would have been not dogmatic but, simply, right.)

What is most surprising and disheartening about Bronner's response to his critics is the way that the final paragraphs of his rejoinder seem to rise in a crescendo of far-reaching innuendo, which seems to question not only revolutionary socialism but perhaps socialism as such—and he consigns Johnson and Camfield (representing “a tiny minority . . . to whom no one ever listens”) to the junk heap of history. That's not very helpful, and it undercuts the genuine contribution that he has to offer.

The Working Class and Socialism . . . and Our Own Struggles for a Better World

In approaching Bronner's genuine contribution, it may be useful to remind ourselves of the two points made earlier about our beloved Rosa: (1) there is a broadly defined revolutionary socialist tradition with Luxemburg gloriously and luminously in the thick of it, and (2) essential aspects of the analysis associated with that revolutionary socialist tradition continue to make sense for our own time. But there is a third point that must be made. And it brings us to what strikes me as the most valid and important aspect of Bronner's challenge.

If we still lived in the golden age of classical Marxism or the heroic years of revolutionary Communism, with massive workers' movements characterized by significant levels of class-consciousness, there would be an obvious ways to make the revolutionary Marxist orientation relevant to the political struggles of our time. But those are not our realities, as Bronner brutally insists over and over. “The industrial working class is on the wane, and the labor movement is no longer what it once was. . . . The proletarian internationals of the past have collapsed.” Yes, absolutely true. “The question facing the Left is whether to embrace outmoded forms of thinking or provide new meaning for an old vision.” Yes, absolutely true. “Internationalist, socialist, and democratic principles must be adapted to meet new historical conditions without surrendering their bite.” Yes, absolutely true. One might say (Bronner might not, but I would) that the Marxist analysis of capitalism remains powerful, while the perspective of revolutionary working-class struggle for socialism is in a shambles. As Bronner puts it: “The power of capital still rests on the degree of *organizational* and *ideological* disunity among workers.”

So what *is* to be done?

Despite a tone of self-assurance that Bronner sometimes employs (a tone that so many of us tend toward, even—or especially—when we are unsure), his suggested paths “forward” seem to go in different and contradictory directions. Some of them seem to demand a relentless honesty and critical-mindedness (in regard to Marxist verities), others seem to suspend critical thinking and indulge in self-deception (in regard to the nature of the state and imperialism). We have seen that some of his thoughts seem to throw into question the revolutionary socialist goal as such. Others take us in the direction of continuing the struggle in the spirit of Rosa Luxemburg. In what follows, I want to trace precisely those elements, which one can find in the articles both of Bronner and of his two critics.

“A more radical commitment to social justice must now increasingly seek new forms of alliance between workers and members of the new social movements,” according to Bronner, and Alan Johnson fully agrees, adding that the precondition of independent working-class politics involves “the political constitution of the multi-ethnic and gendered working class as a unity-in-difference.”

In the words of David Camfield, we need “a socialist political strategy which takes as its start-point struggles, however small, in which working-class and oppressed people assert their needs against employers, governments and other instances of domination,” emphasizing the need for “unions and community-based workers organizations (including those of women and other oppressed people),” as well as “organizations of peasants, indigenous people, students, and others,” adding up to an inclusiveness that also characterizes the vision of Bronner and Johnson.

“Justice is a river with many tributaries,” Bronner tells us. “Most women and gays, minorities and environmentalists, have a stake in protecting the gains made by labor in the past as surely as labor had a stake in furthering many of their concerns in the future.” Johnson tells us of the need—also explicitly embraced by the others—to “fight to protect threatened welfare benefits and democratic rights from roll-back, and then to use that resistance as a springboard to fight for further reforms is a key to socialist advance.” All of them identify with movement for global justice associated with massive international protests in Seattle, Prague, Washington, D.C., Genoa, and elsewhere.

These are the kinds of things that we should all work on—in as serious and as organized a manner as possible, with the relatively small socialist groups finding ways to work in alliance rather than sectarian competition. In fact most of the people in the diverse, fragmented, incohesive working-class majority don't identify with any of the existing groups, and it is most important to reach out to these brothers and sisters who will be new to the struggle and are not about to enlist in one or another ideological group. We cannot afford to pretend that we are living in the glory days of either the Second International or Third International—in many ways our organizational and ideological realities are closer to those preceding the First International. And of course in some ways they are very different from anything that has come before.

It seems to me that the basic elements of the revolutionary socialist tradition still make sense, but there are ways to apply them that would make very little sense. Times are different. Just as aspects of the *Communist Manifesto* made more sense in 1890 and 1930 than they did in 1848, so will aspects of the revolutionary socialist perspective have greater relevance later than they do now (especially if we do the right kinds of things between now and then). We should have respect for our history, but not at the expense of respecting, understanding, and being able to truly affect the present-day realities of which we are part. We need tools, not totems or artifacts.

With modesty and patience, as we help advance the struggles for a better world and learn from the experiences associated with these struggles, we may be able to sort more adequately through the divergent notions of Bronner and his critics. And then what Rosa Luxemburg and her comrades thought may take on a greater meaning than we are able to find at this particular moment in history.

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CHAPTER 6

Socialist Metaphysics and Luxemburg's Legacy

Michael J. Thompson

Theodor Adorno once wrote that tradition is “unconscious remembrance.”¹ Adorno’s claim—wrought in superb dialectical fashion—was intended as a critique of the rigid structures of meaning and thought that were inherited passively from the past. Liberation from such thinking was possible only through a consistently critical stance toward accepted thought, even when the nature of this thought was ostensibly “radical.” We all too often associate this problem of tradition and its constraining character with conservatism. But the debate that has arisen over Stephen Bronner’s article “Red Dreams” in a previous issue of *New Politics* has shown that the Left is all too prone to this same tendency. The debate currently underway has gone, in my view, far beyond debating the scholastic issues of Rosa Luxemburg’s thought and penetrated into the very heart of contemporary socialist thought itself.

I should say from the inception that I am not in opposition to Stephen’s argument as outlined in both his first article as well as in his response to David Camfield and Alan Johnson, even though I do have some criticisms of his argument, which I will express here. Stephen is an advisory editor of the journal *Logos*, of which I am an editor, and was my teacher in graduate school as well. But this does not mean that

my contribution to this debate should be construed as anything other than a defense of the feasibility of socialism and its ideals. I believe that the current irrelevance of socialism and the Left, more broadly in political thought and public and social affairs, is due largely to the self-peripheralization of contemporary socialist thought through an association with anachronistic political ideas as well as an unrealistic dependence upon outmoded political strategies and “solutions” to the problems of capitalism. This debate must therefore be seen as a debate over the modern meaning of socialism since the criticisms of Stephen’s views have, in my view, serious implications for socialist thought in the early twenty-first century.

But my entry into the present debate has been prompted not simply by the line of argument on one issue over another but on what I see as the expression of what I will call here a *socialist metaphysics*: the notion held by thinkers aligned with socialist politics that certain political ideas and forms of social organization will guarantee a liberatory course of history and that these ideas and forms of social and political organization that have been held close to the political tradition of socialism throughout the twentieth century are ahistorical, and uncritically embraced. They therefore operate metaphysically, as ideas detached from reality and the empirical truths of contemporary society in all its complexities. More importantly, I see this as the one component that has held socialist ideas back and prevented them from properly engaging the problems of modern capitalism and modern liberalism. The reactions to Stephen’s argument by Johnson and Camfield seem, in my view, to be prime examples of socialist metaphysics and it is that which I wish to address first before engaging in some remarks on Stephen’s argument.

Socialism, Democracy, and the State

I will start by addressing the problem of the relationship between democracy and socialism. The idea of democracy has been one area where socialist metaphysics plays itself out most strongly in this debate. This is most evident in the discussion of workers’ councils as a form of democratic self-organization. Alan Johnson’s discussion of workers’ councils in his response to Stephen harks back to the most historically situated forms of democratic participation that the

socialist tradition articulated. It was not at all surprising to me to read a critical account of Stephen's position, but it was shocking indeed to see the idea of workers' councils being advocated as late as the early twenty-first century.

The idea for the workers' councils has its roots in the Paris Commune and those romantic associations still persist. But any casual acquaintance with the literature on workers' councils paints a picture of them being a road to democratic participation only where parliamentary forms were not historically present. In Russia, after the first soviet formed in 1905 in St. Petersburg, Trotsky wrote that the workers' councils "organized the working masses, directed the political strikes and demonstrations, armed the workers, and protected the population against pogroms."² They served a purpose that unions and the workers' movement would in nations that already had republican governments. They were the fighting organizations of workers and of peasants in Russia and were progressive with respect to Russian political history and to the Tsarist state, but there was, in general, a refusal to grant the councils that same status in western European nations.

Karl Kautsky, in *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, admitted that workers' councils were an impressive phenomenon, but was opposed to them as a replacement of a fully democratic state since the exclusion of the bourgeoisie—at least in Western nations—would exclude and thereby disenfranchise a large portion of the public. I see little difference in modern America or Europe in this regard. Karl Renner's argument against the councils is perhaps most relevant here. For Renner, both workers' councils (*Arbeiterriite*) and the less ambitious "factory councils" (*Betriebsriite*) or "works councils" were insufficient to produce a fully realized political democracy since they were composed of only one strata of society—the proletariat—and would be able to represent and handle only limited sectional interests.³ Since workers were not a universal class in all political affairs, workers' councils were considered undemocratic from a broader political perspective once they were scrutinized more closely from the standpoint of more advanced political formations, such as the liberal republican state in western Europe.⁴

But even more, the idea of workers' councils should be seen as sociologically out of touch with all present political and economic realities once we consider the problem that the "working class" has

itself grown increasingly heterogeneous with respect to its interests as well as its relation to capital. Simply saying that the working class—especially in advanced capitalist economies—is defined by its relation to capital as wage/income earners simplifies the true problem that socialist ideas and institutions face. Furthermore, it is no longer the case that workers' councils would be able to provide a more progressive form of democracy than the expansion of liberal institutions that presently exist. Democracy and socialism, it seems to me, require the expansion of democracy into the economic sphere. Although this is not something Johnson would deny, he is mistaken in seeing the council system as a remedy to this problem.

At a deeper, more theoretical level, why ought we to assume that workers' councils are a more profound realization of democracy than the potentialities of the liberal republican state? The expansion of liberal institutions of accountability seem more "democratic" than a vague conception of workers' councils, which are (1) theoretically fuzzy with little historical precedent and have *absolutely no appeal* for modern workers of any kind; and (2) simply impede the development of socialist political ideas from truly articulating institutional alternatives to the present. I would add to Stephen's question presented in his reply to show any political force or party that has workers' councils on its agenda: "What segment of society has even the slightest desire for such organizations?" In place of a democracy defined in terms of Russian soviets, it may be more fruitful and much more appealing to those who are not socialists, to work toward pushing the liberal republican state to further levels of democratic development.

The decentralized nature of direct democratic forms are tendencies in socialist and radical thought that hold socialist politics back from evolving democratic institutions more suited for modern problems. The bickering over councils seems more to me to be over an archaic, vestigial piece of history than over a truly realistic and even desirable social alternative to what could be achieved through the expansion of democratic institutions linked to a state bent toward the realization of full political democracy.

This brings me to David Camfield. The problem of the state and democracy in socialist thought is complex, but statements such as the following deserve some discussion:

The liberal state upon which Bronner's perspective ultimately depends is not a reliable vehicle for efforts to limit the power of the market. Mass struggles—such as those in France—have slowed neoliberalism's dismantling of the social programs provided by the state. But it is increasingly evident that state power is an integral and active dimension of global capitalism's offensive.

The retreat from, and the cynicism toward, the state as well as the move toward direct democratic forms of organization is at the same time a retreat from the notions of universalism and accountability that socialism and democracy have always privileged. It is a retreat because these are not institutional forms that can necessarily deal with the other problems of governance beyond that of the workplace. There is no guarantee that the individuals that make up any workers' council will, for instance, be inclined to allow homosexuals to marry. What, in other words, makes such nonstate, even antistate, formations more receptive to democratic ideas? Why should they be taken seriously as alternatives to the liberal state? There is no answer, let alone justification given in either Camfield's or Johnson's replies. Socialist ideas such as these are inadequate because they end up reducing all political phenomena to the category of capital itself. To advocate workers' councils and to see the state as nothing more than a tool of the interests of capital is to simultaneously emasculate the very power socialism would have at its disposal to work against the effects and tendencies of capital. It is only through the powerful institutions of the state—those that are democratically accountable—that the force of capital can be countered.

We should recall here Marx's critique of Hegel's theory of the state. For Marx, the state was not inherently antidemocratic nor was it the creation and sole vehicle of capital and the bourgeoisie, but its claim to being the representative of the general interest was merely a *pretension*. Economic interests do define much of what the capitalist state does and how it acts, but this does not in any way mean that the state *per se* is the problem and that it should be replaced by romantic social forms promising direct democracy. If anything, it implies the requirement to further privilege the *political* over the *economic*, as Stephen points out, since it is only through this that the state can be moved toward the promotion of the general interest at the expense of particular interest.

Indeed, Marx did see the Paris Commune as a significant movement toward a higher form of democracy, one that was superior to that of the bourgeois republican state. But it is essential to point out that this was not Marx's only position since he did admit that universal suffrage granted by the liberal state could become a potent vehicle for working-class interests and working-class power.⁵ Similarly, Marx also saw that the existence of democratic institutions *within* the liberal state could provide a substitute for violent revolution.⁶

In addition, I am not sure that there have been "mass struggles" in France for the fight against the rolling back of welfare benefits, although I would acknowledge that mass movements have been able to show the state that they are accountable to a large number of people and that their policies ought to reflect this fact. The state should be seen as more than simply the evil twin of capital; it also possesses the power to transform social relations and expand the political protection of the weak and disenfranchised. Yes, the state works by means of coercion at times, but who would deny that the type of repression practiced by the state in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Western democracies is a reality of the past and not a definitive aspect of the modern liberal state?

By defining itself outside of the institutions of the modern state, socialist goals cannot be realized without an anachronistic claim to revolution and a theoretically weak and historically bankrupt reliance on workers' councils as some path toward socialist democracy. Only once socialist ideas come to grips with the political and economic realities of the present will socialism be able to take its place as a viable alternative to contemporary social and political life. Only once we see that the outmoded claims to workers' councils and the abolition of the state are practical impossibilities and theoretical cul-de-sacs will we see that socialism has yet to come into its own in the twenty-first century. Illusions as to the strategies of socialist democracy should be dispensed with and a more pragmatic politics needs to be put in its place. Socialism may in fact require the political vision of utopia, but it must prevent utopianism from infecting socialist institutional proposals and tactical politics.

What seems to be missed by both Johnson and Camfield is that—as Marx's critique of Hegel's theory of the state expressed it—socialism was to emerge as the result not of the abolition of the bourgeois state,

but as a result of the *Aufhebung des Staats*, not Engels's "withering away" of the state (*der Staat stirb ab*). *Aufhebung* meaning transcendence through preservation and destruction, there seems even less theoretical ground to continue to make such naïve arguments about the state and socialist strategy. The liberal republican state needs to be seen in this context, and the development and enhancement of social freedoms from civil rights to workers' rights in the twentieth century are testament to this.

Radical Liberalism or Socialism?

This leads me to Stephen's claim of the primacy of politics over economics. Indeed, there is little question that the scientific Marxism of the Second International is completely irrelevant both socially and politically. To accept a teleological argument for political change based upon economic calculation and the collapse of capitalism under its own weight is similarly absurd. But this does not mean a wholesale privileging of politics over economics. Political judgments alone, even buttressed by the best ethical argumentation, cannot overcome the material problems of scarcity and distribution. Economics is more than a merely descriptive enterprise, as Marx knew full well; it is also a creative problem solver in its own right and it requires a place *beside* politics as a means of overcoming the problems of capitalism and the construction of some satisfactory form of social democracy.

Stephen leads us to believe that politics is now the one domain in which socialist goals can be achieved. Politics is seen as the one area where social critique emanates from and where the radical reformation of society begins and ends. What happens, for instance, once our political convictions lead us to the conclusion that the production process of capitalism is inherently "unethical" according to some socialist moral stance? What happens when we want to actually move ahead with ideas of "economic justice," a fairly vague term today once we consider that there is really no interest to push for even a 35-hour work week, unions are looked at askance, and the problems of the environment are too big and too abstract to mobilize everyday people to actually push for even political attention to such issues? I am not sure that the peripheral existence of social movements privileging a

class ideal will get us anywhere in this regard. Even if we were to push for full employment and for a more egalitarian distribution of incomes and raise the quality of life for the poor, this could conceivably still be achieved within the boundaries of political liberalism. Socialism would mean a more profound transformation of economy and society. The problem seems to me to be in the divergence between the “clean hands” of political ideas and ideals and the prescriptions they provide, and the “dirty” ones of social science, economics, and actual policy construction, something the socialist tradition has always shied away from due to its exclusion from mainstream politics and to its own detriment.

This has a deeper philosophical valence. Marx, like Hegel before him, saw freedom not as the removal of barriers to one’s self-development; surely there are aspects of freedom that encompass that. More than this, they saw that freedom was the *insight into necessity*; that the overcoming of the material problems that confront humanity requires the scientific analysis of those problems. It is, in this sense, a partner to labor since it serves to enhance that capacity of humans to transform their environment. Economics is, in this sense, a science of distribution, efficiency, and production; it is not simply the vulgar economics of the Second International and the gross positivism of Marxism’s “golden age.” We must remember that these material problems are often either detached from political ideas (as in the case of Soviet economic planning) or attached to simplified, ahistorical social, psychological, and political categories (such as libertarianism or economic liberalism). This means that a new, *critical political economy* is needed just as much as there is a need to reevaluate socialist political ideals, as Stephen has taken pains to point out—a critical political economy that can address the concerns of political and economic democratic values and also find the correct institutional referents for the realization of such ideas. Without these institutions, political ideas can remain only as abstractions. Regulative ideals are important, and a useful Kantian tool for getting out of the Marxian problem of teleology. But there is a limit to political ideas alone, and a real need to overcome the problem of economic constraints. Socialism has this as its primary concern over liberalism, which, by and large, has no problem with capitalism as a system, only its inequalitarian effects.

Kant and liberalism both see an *opposition* between the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity. Practical reason and politics are distinct from the material world and need not consider it in its rationale and operation. Hegel and Marx are radical precisely because this metaphysics is defused. Now, I should point out that I see that Stephen's position is not wholly identical to that of Kant and of modern liberalism—at least up to a point. His broader point about the importance of political ideas is well taken as we see from his recent response:

Remembering the real achievements of the labor movement, the fight for time, and for the dignity of working people, gives socialist theory a hook in reality. It places modern socialists in an anti-totalitarian tradition of *radical* reformism. It forces young people both to recognize structural constraints and the kind of struggle that was required to introduce what was so often derided as mere "legislation." It creates the possibility of reconnecting theory with practice. And—most important—it raises a meaningful hope for socialist politics.

These are important moments in the legacy of the Left and its political push toward enhanced freedoms and new political possibilities. But it is not necessarily *socialist* in nature. To be sure, it can be argued quite persuasively that the labor movement and its gains as well as the civil rights movement were moments of the historical expansion and evolution of liberalism. The 40-hour work week or the rights of blacks to vote and sit on a bus like any other white citizen are important gains, but are they inherently *socialist*? I am not sure that the issues Stephen points to are particularly socialist even as they do point to important moments of the struggle for freedom, recognition, and human dignity. If they are not, then there is nothing in the mere idealism of political notions such as freedom from constraint, oppression, exploitation, etc., that cannot be dealt with—at the popular level—by the institutions and ideology of modern liberalism.

It is also important to note that these were political ideas that were, in a sense, permitted by the capitalist economy. Capital certainly fought the existence of organized labor, and it was only through the struggles of the labor movement—both in the courts and on the

streets themselves—that modern liberalism was able to take root.⁷ Similarly, the Civil Rights Movement restated the core principles that were inherent in the American Constitution from its inception. What was needed at the time was to fight against preliberal institutions and attitudes that still plagued America and prevented a deeper sense of democracy from being realized.

But again, the problem of socialism is not to merely draw a line from these struggles to more grandiose political ideals. It is also to see that radical political ideas can become concrete only insofar as the liberal capitalist state can accommodate them. The words are important here: insofar as the liberal capitalist state *can* accommodate them, not is *willing* to accommodate them. This is a crucial concern; if socialism has at its base the core principles of human freedom, the expansion of human and civil rights, the elimination of an arbitrary exercise of power, and the accountability of economic institutions as well as all political and social ones, then we are faced with the dilemma of how far radical reformism can proceed before we run into the boundary conditions of modern capitalism and the economic constraints it presents us with, a boundary condition that will not be able to inspire revolution, but one that will more likely—due to the impact of reification and the evaporation of class consciousness—lead to a more servile acceptance of the status quo.

We need not accept the vulgar Marxist thesis about “base and superstructure.” I agree with Stephen that socialist theory requires an emphasis on the relative autonomy of political ideas, but the primacy of the political over the scientific aspects of social science does not take us very far. Indeed, I would argue that the more we detach a socialist politics from a critical political economy, the more we lapse into a “radical liberalism,” not a viable socialism. It may be that books on political theory can continue to debate the abstract notions of freedom and the logical implications of such and such a thesis on various political possibilities. But this does not necessarily link theory and practice. It may be that the most realistic relation between theory and practice can manifest itself in the sphere of political-economic policies that can transform social relations as well as those with the natural environment. I would agree that this is largely driven and inspired by political ideas, but this does not get us past the insuperable boundary of the economics of capitalism. When Rosa Luxemburg argued, and

Stephen references this, that the power of capital is a positive function of the organizational and ideological disunity of workers, this was not merely a political statement. Luxemburg also argued that the gains achieved by unionized workers could always be rolled back during a period of economic recession. It is the existence of capital and the way it organizes society around its own logic that needs to be dealt with in the end. In this sense, political ideas and political movements are key; but there is also the essential need to continue to open up capitalism's "black box," as Marx did in *Capital*, and not rely on the sphere of politics for all emancipatory solutions.

This is not pessimism but an honest and intense realism. I am not calling into question Stephen's understanding of socialism, which I agree with in principle and very much in substance as well. I am merely arguing that the problem with privileging political ideas over economic science leaves us at the mercy of capitalism in the end, not in a critical position with respect to it, and also that the essence of socialist transformation consists in changes in both political as well as economic spheres, something Rudolf Hilferding knew all too well. What I mean by this is that political ideals need to be linked up to ways of managing concrete economic problems. Thinkers from Aristotle to Smith, Lavoisier, John Stuart Mill, and Marx himself have seen this to be the case. Economic justice is, to a certain extent, an issue of politics: redistribution according to more "just" standards and more participation in the workplace for laborers, for example. But this brings us back to a crucial concern: with the expansion of liberalism, there is no longer a desire on the part of laborers or on the part of young people to take up these concerns. The struggles against the World Trade Organization may show some that radical ideas still have an ability to move younger people, but it has also betrayed an ignorance of globalization itself as well as a naiveté with respect to larger political institutions and has reached back to a certain anarchism without purpose.

The separation of economics from politics is an aspect of neoclassical social scientific thinking. In this sense, I wholly agree with Abba Lerner's insight that economics "has gained the title of the queen of the social sciences by choosing *solved* political problems as its domain."⁸ This applies mainly to the methods of neoclassical thinking. A critical political economy will be required to solve the problems that

capitalism creates and to pose the institutional and policy alternatives that socialist political ideals—such as those that Stephen speaks of—will require for progressive social and political change. Social critique with socialist goals cannot take on the attributes that accompany the bourgeois division of the social sciences. What we must see is that economics, sociology, political science, and the speculative moments of ethics, political theory, and social philosophy all play a crucial role in the course of social transformation and always have. The highlighting of one of these with respect to any other results in one-sided analyses and an insufficient critique: rigidified technical analysis in the case of economics, and political and social idealism in the case of theory and philosophy.

I do not mean to confine socialist ideas to the sphere of policy construction. I do believe that a crucial dialectic exists between abstract political ideas and their actual translation into practice. This can be done through policy, if such power were to be at hand, but it must also be “on the table” when it comes to social movements as well. The larger institutional context—economic as well as political—needs to be configured into any progressive social movement and not left to theory alone. Indeed, Stephen’s point about linking social movements around the notion of class is a step toward unifying what is today a disparate, fragmented, and sectarian Left. Economics cannot be the answer to political problems, but we must also realize that dealing with capitalism and a deeply ingrained liberalism requires deeper critiques and more realizable institutional alternatives.

Notes

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum Press, 1973), p. 54.
2. Leon Trotsky, *Our Political Tasks* (London: New Park, 1979).
3. “Democracy and the Council System,” in Tom Bottomore and Patrick Goode, eds., *Austro-Marxism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978 [1921]).
4. Factory councils are perhaps a more promising avenue to reform workshop relations and expand democracy on the shop floor, but this is quite a different thing from them being able to step up to the task of promoting political democracy more broadly.
5. Marx’s exact words are: “The carrying out of Universal Suffrage in England would, therefore, be a far more socialistic measure than anything which has

been honored with that name on the Continent. Its inevitable result, here, is the political supremacy of the working class.” From “The Chartists” in the *New York Daily Tribune*, August 25, 1852.

6. “We do not deny that there are countries like England and America, and if I am familiar with your institutions, Holland, where labor may attain its goal by peaceful means.” *The First International: Minutes of Hague Congress of 1872*, Hans Gerth, ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958), p. 236.
7. The argument here is that labor served as a means of pushing liberalism into workplace relations that were previously dominated by preliberal notions of work and ownership. See the interesting work of Karen Orren, *Belated Feudalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
8. Abba Lerner, “The Economics and Politics of Consumer Sovereignty,” *American Economic Review* (May 1972), p. 259 (emphasis in the original).

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CHAPTER 7

Rosa Redux Ad Absurdum

Barry Finger

Keep your anachronistic notions of national self-determination and workers' councils. Keep your irrelevant view of "science." Keep your insular beliefs. But then when you glance at the world, perhaps you will consider everything as simply "false consciousness?" Was everyone an idiot except your "tiny minority," who still knows everything better, but to whom no one ever listens?

—Stephen E. Bronner, 2002

From the traditional perspective these unactualized possibilities and unrealized potentialities for liberation come to be seen as "irrational." Consequently, they can be dismissed—but always in the name of the present that has become manifest. In the name of the status quo, the relative validity of unactualized needs and demands that were expressed both in theory and praxis are brushed aside, and termed "impossible to achieve."

—Stephen E. Bronner, 1987

For, just as materialism itself originally grew out of the critique of religion, so too must the mystification of capitalist ideology and production relations—the most progressive aspects of which cannot be actualized within capitalist society

and the most reactionary of which simply serve to veil the functioning of the given order—be criticized in a concrete manner and in terms of the concrete alternative of workers' control that is, after all, the basis of emancipatory socialism.

—Stephen E. Bronner, 1977–78

Somewhere in the past 25 years, Rosa Luxemburg, once a “revolutionary for our times,” became a liberal. The precise date of that transmogrification is unknown, but its discovery was announced with little advance fanfare, but with much subsequent consternation in the Summer 2001 and Winter 2001–2002 issues of *New Politics*. In making his case, Stephen brought to bear, with the typical erudition, clarity of presentation and impish wit that makes his fortunate students the envy of his political audience, the full weight of critical Marxism, the Marxism of Georg Lukács and of Karl Korsch. All of which is even more dazzling, given that the latter are, at least to this untutored mind, more often associated with ultra-leftism than with Social Democracy. So, in effect, Stephen performed the audacious tandem mental trapeze act of having inverted Left and Right not only in the person of Rosa Luxemburg, but of the entire socialist analytical continuum as well.

Stephen insists, and not without considerable persuasive force, that his viewpoint cannot be meaningfully merged with that of classical socialist revisionism. To do so would be to repudiate the key insights of critical materialism that rescued Marxism equally from the sterility of “orthodox doctrinalism” as well as from all belief in the genetic inevitability of evolutionary socialism and its corollary, “ideology of compromise,” through which the future socialist commonwealth might be eased. But that does not absolve Stephen from the whiff of suspicion in having dissolved socialism in an equally corrosive, if altogether different and novel, solution.

In Stephen's words: “*I don't identify socialism with any particular institutional form, including councils, and I view its purposes today less as the pursuit of the utopian 'other' than as the ongoing creation of economic and political conditions in which working people can expand the range of their knowledge, their experiences and their private as well as their public pursuit.*” [my emphasis, BF] This formulation, of course, bears a notable resemblance in tone to Bernstein's famous assertion

that “the movement is everything, the goal is nothing.” Stephen, moreover, explicitly confirms that his approach leaves no room for a “final goal.” Nevertheless, too much should not be made of this similarity despite their mutual agreement that socialism is to be equated with the reforms attained under capitalism, with the significant caveat that Stephen—unlike the classical school of revisionism—is alarmed at the vulnerability of working-class conquests, previously seen as irrevocable, by the resurgent forces of neoliberalism. For this and for other reasons that will be examined, Stephen is not burdened with an unwavering faith in the transformation of capitalism into socialism, and the purposes of reform as he sees it, or at least as I understand him to see it, are not merely to attenuate the rough edges of capitalism but to raise the ethical necessity of “mitigating the whip of the market through the *state* and abolishing the exercise of arbitrary power *by* the state” as the manifold conditions for furthering democracy.

But what is so striking about this formulation is that, with the exception of the modifier “working,” such aims as Stephen identifies with socialism could be endorsed by the entire spectrum of *democratic* thought from the libertarian Right to the green Left. His means—of supplanting, where necessary, the market by the state coupled with the struggle to limit the free scope of bureaucratic power—further differentiates him along the democratic spectrum and places him squarely in line with a long host of social reformers on the Left. Yet, Stephen’s party of reform is curiously distinguished exclusively by its social composition and not by any specific attention to workers’ problems and/or class concerns. For that reason, his selection of the working class as the principal agency of this program does not strike me as a *necessary* political or logical deduction from his analysis. There are innumerable abuses of the market and business malpractice from pollution, to price gouging, to concentrations of oligopolistic and monopoly power and influence peddling, to the maldistribution of wealth, to urban renewal and educational reform, which have been the traditional domain of middle-class reformers and which fully conform to Stephen’s concerns as articulated. What this program retains in common moreover with the traditional parties of middle-class reform is its dogged insistence on leaving intact and undisturbed a social horizon and future aims defined solely by the limits of capitalism. Insofar as

he offers any justification for “privileging” the working class, to use an infelicitous phrase he seems so fond of, it finds scarce rationalization beyond the “hook in reality” Stephen believes might be gained by appealing to the “real achievements of the labor movement,” the most successful and, in its European Marxist form, most ambitious reform movement in history. A success, it might be added, that bears necessary connection to the very revolutionary *aspirations* for a non-exploitative classless society Stephen appears to cynically dismiss as the baggage of the “utopian other.”

However, the old revolutionary labor movement, as Stephen is at pains to remind us, simply no longer exists. Who then would he be casting his hook to? A labor movement whose militancy and idealism seem so diminished that the very notion of working-class power adheres little more than as a distant memory, still less a “regulative ideal”? He surely cannot have “faith” that such a combative labor movement, marred by ideological and organizational disunity, can be reconstituted along socialist lines. For that would seemingly return us to the very teleological metaphysics that Stephen is quite certain critical materialism so neatly disposed of. If capitalism does not create its own “grave-diggers” and if “socialism becomes a contingent enterprise, or putting it in the terms of the time, a purely ‘ethical’ demand or project,” what necessary connection *must* it have with the existing working class?

* * *

Let us leave this question in abeyance for the moment and consider the problem from a different angle and ask: What necessary connection does this “ethical demand or project” have with socialism, as Marx or Luxemburg understood it? When it comes down to it, all that is being invoked—stripped of its philosophical finery—is the call for an invigorated mixed economy against the roll back of the welfare state. Indeed, it is a program that, in spirit, Marx might have celebrated for expanding the scope of the “political economy of the working class.” But such victories as accrue the “political economy of the working class,” and fulfill the “aims” of socialism as Stephen outlines them, are self-limiting in character precisely because they leave undisturbed the overall accumulation structure of capitalism.

The abolition of child labor, the eight-hour day, health and safety regulations, social security and old age pensions, trade union rights, unemployment compensation, minimum wage laws, antidiscrimination laws, etc., all restrict the arbitrary tyranny of the individual capitalist entity and may reduce the totality of one's life sacrificed in *direct* servitude to the capitalist class. They may even whet the appetite for social justice on a larger scale. If so, all the better. But a more equitable distribution of the working day or of the social product still leaves a working class forced to accept exploitation as the inescapable condition for securing its livelihood. Whether that disturbs Stephen or not, whether Stephen cares for ultimate aims or not, whether such reforms adapted, intensified, polished, and brought up to date are the indisputable embodiment of the socialist spirit, there is no sensible standard by which such proposals—radical as that may be in today's climate—can ever be called a socialist *program*.

It is equally delusional, and the demands of accuracy outweigh civility at having to resort to such terminology, to believe that such reforms, for all their laudable benefits, fortify and broaden the existing democracy. Whatever the claims of capitalism to democratic forms of representation—to a liberal republic, whatever invaluable civil liberties and political freedoms have been attained and maintained through incessant struggle—the fact remains that the existence of class divisions in society makes a genuine democracy impossible. Conversely, it is generally preferable from a ruling-class perspective to rule, if feasible, with the consent of the governed than to support the vastly increased cost of suppression needed to rule against their will. But equally under the liberal republic, as under other—authoritarian—state forms, control over the means of production, distribution, and communication arms the economically dominant class with power that extends over every aspect of social life. That power may not be absolute, it may be blunted and circumscribed—but within its arc, power is not and cannot be shared. Genuine democracy is unattainable under a bourgeois state, because the formality of equal rights is neutralized and subverted by the socioeconomic inequality preserved by the state between ruler and ruled. Yet, without the democratic direction and control of social policy from below, humanity, even when it is for the moment well-fed and relatively secure, cannot be genuinely free.

What then of Stephen's estimation of the "liberal republic"? I am unclear from the context what Stephen means by "*initially*" in his assertion that "the institutional goal of the revolution initially sought by Luxemburg has, in short, been realized." It may very well mean only that she in common with her entire generation of socialist revolutionaries aspired as their immediate aim to eliminate the systems of monarchies that dominated the continent and to replace them with liberal republics. If so, who could take exception? Indeed, Luxemburg considered as did Marx and Engels the liberal republic to be "the most powerful and indispensable means for carrying on the *class struggle*." But to suggest that the "liberal republic" was coterminous with the "general understanding of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in the decades between the fall of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the triumph of the Bolsheviks in 1917" is a genuine flight of fantasy. The liberal republic was considered the most favorable arrangement for the *oppressed* working class, that is the working class still subject to the domination of capital, to gain through mass struggle an awareness of its distinct class interests and for socialists to educate and organize on the basis of that awareness.

No revolutionary socialist of the era believed that the bourgeois-democratic state—the liberal republic, if you will—could ever outgrow or outlive its purpose as an effective bureaucratic instrumentality through which the ruling class might maintain its social legitimacy. Form follows function not only in architecture but in the apparatus of class rule as well. What, after all, is the actual *design* of this democracy? The mass is allowed to vote at set intervals and to petition for redress at all times. It remains a bystander to the passage of legislation, a wallflower to the adoption of laws and their enforcement. The parliament proposes and the executive bureaucracy disposes in its own fashion even if that requires—especially in times of crises—redefining the very meaning of legality, without any superintendence and guidance from below. The capitalist class exercises its social rule not directly, but through its immediate control of the means of shaping public opinion, its financial control of the political parties, by its direct occupation of the legislatures, and by the leverage over independent government officials and the deliberative machinery that its wealth accords. Stephen, in his defense of liberal democracy, affects an entirely arbitrary separation of the liberal republic

from the antidemocratic barriers implanted in its institutions by the elites as a necessary aspect of an *indivisible* process of social domination under capitalism. The liberal republic solicits the *consent* of the governed for alternative ruling-class agendas so that the *will* of the governed might remain unknown, undeveloped, or thwarted and its *needs* either unmet or met in a brokered and fractured fashion. If, on the other hand, the people—the working class and its supporters and allies—are to be, in any real sense, the authors of their own fate, they would face the daunting task of fundamentally reworking the most democratic of liberal republics they might inherit and of pioneering a democracy with a breadth and sweep of active participation unimaginable within the confines of capitalist society and antithetical indeed to capitalism's very survival.

I do not wish to be misunderstood on this matter as being dismissive, sectarian, or flippant about bourgeois democracy. The tangible democratic rights that do exist under a liberal democracy, for all their limitations, are cherished and invaluable achievements. They were also great victories extracted or thrust upon the ruling classes in prolonged and bloody battle by the masses from below. In the broad sweep of capitalism it would not be erroneous to maintain that significant reforms were acceded to by the ruling classes to short circuit the demand for even greater concessions to revolutionary forces. This is true of the eight-hour day as it is of the right to vote for the propertyless and for women, the dismantling of American apartheid, and the whole host of other concessions that allow the majority a semicivilized existence. As such they remain treasured legacies of the nineteenth- and twentieth century-revolutionary movements, that socialists and consistent democrats are duty bound to vigilantly protect. For these rights remain ever fragile, threatened in the first place by the oh-so democratic ruling classes themselves. There is after all a straight bloodline connecting the Alien and Sedition Acts, the Palmer raids, the Dies Committee, HUAC, McCarthyism, Cointelpro, and the USA Patriot Act of today.

So, when Stephen advises that his “work endorses experiments with ‘secondary’ or ‘associative’ organizations that might provide a more direct form of democracy and . . . [has] even suggested that the council can be integrated into the liberal republican state”—as if socialism merely requires a democratic tweak here and there to spruce up the

existing liberal republic, he betrays the political gulf that has opened not only between himself and Luxemburg, but between himself and the whole revolutionary socialist tradition. Stephen presents a woe-fully *distorted* neo-Luxemburgian formulation in his assertion that “the future of democracy in the form of a liberal republic must serve as the precondition for socialism, and not the other way around.” For it was Luxemburg who emphasized to the contrary that “we have always distinguished the social kernel from the political form of *bourgeois* democracy; we have always exposed the bitter kernel of social inequality and lack of freedom under the sweet shell of formal equality and freedom—not in order to reject the latter, but to spur the working class not to be satisfied with the shell, but rather to conquer political power and to fill it with a new social content.” That is why Luxemburg, in common with every other revolutionary socialist, but with an uncommon eloquence, could assert that the “fate of democracy was bound up with the socialist movement.” For socialism aims to translate the democratic formalities of the liberal republic into its fullest realization precisely by providing the masses access and control over the very material bases previously monopolized by the capitalist class. It aims, in other words, to translate the paper privileges of the worker-citizen into a fully functioning democracy that invests in society’s rank and file for the first time the power to regulate social conditions in accordance with the values of freedom and solidarity, rather than the needs of property and profit, a context where a free and equal citizenry can harmonize its interests by means of rational compromise, rather than on the basis of power relations. It therefore holds in its offering the wholesale introduction of civilized values to the common patrimony of humanity and fashions a social environment distinguished by the unique scope for the nourishment of the free and creative aspect of the individual personality that those values make possible.

* * *

Two rejoinders are offered. Both flow from the internal logic of Stephen’s understanding of socialism not as an historical alternative, but as the result of radical modifications to the existing order. One involves the question of immediacy, the other of democratic principle.

“Where on the planet, right now” he asks, “is the question of councils or *socialist* revolution on the agenda?” But, even if these demands had living resonance, he also insists that they would nevertheless be devoid of merit. For the sole alternative to the liberal-democratic state is an “authoritarian or totalitarian *party* standing above the rule of law. [my emphasis, BF] There is no reason to believe that the workers’ council provides a different solution to this problem or that it can dispense with the need for an independent judiciary or other bureaucratic institutions to safeguard the civil liberties of conservative critics and opponents.”

And by extension, revolutionary activity is only justifiable if it returns society threatened by the authoritarian Right to the *status quo ante*. In Stephen’s words, “My view accepts the need for revolution, *though as a tactic rather than a strategic goal*, when working people are incapable of having their most basic grievances addressed and their democratic rights recognized.” That is, it would be indefensible, and Stephen insists, for him, unsupportable, were revolutionary socialists to exhort workers and their allies to carry the battle beyond the defense of an imperiled bourgeois republic to a higher form of democracy, a workers’ democracy, the latter presumably being, in any case, a snare. Indeed, even Stephen’s very devotion to revolutionary tactics—more accurately, *insurrectionary* tactics—divorced from revolutionary goals rings hollow. For how would workers defend an embattled liberal democracy except by creating new, substitute, vehicles of struggle—councils, workplace committees, militias—which, themselves, are embryonic forms of a new revolutionary democracy? Should revolutionary socialists be urged—or even be compelled, perhaps by other workers—to abandon these institutions once the immediate threat is dissolved? I wonder how Stephen might retroactively apply these principles say to the Spanish Civil War or to Germany at the end of the First World War? How does one avoid the conclusion that Stephen has become a liberal captive of his own antirevolutionary dogma?

This is not an issue of councils as opposed to parliaments posed solely in abstract hypotheticals. What can be said on this subject from the Paris Commune on is that historical experience shows that all revolutions erect organs of popular resistance that are at the same time organs of popular rule, and that these organs, usually councils,

tend to become the institutions of the new state power. Moreover in all socialist revolutions witnessed in the past, there have resulted civil wars in which upholding the parliament becomes the rallying cry for the forces of reaction. And this is what should be expected. As revolutionary passions push the center of the democratic consensus to the far left, capitalist and reactionary elements can only appeal to the masses by championing lesser democratic forms that retain historical resonance but quickly lose their allure to the fuller more extensive democratic order arising in its midst.

Let us look more closely at Stephen's other objection. By raising the issue of immediacy, Stephen insists that his understanding of socialism bears with it an attachment to realism lacking in the woolly and idle speculations of those who seek socialism in a higher, more complete, and extensive form of democracy. Historical materialism, he admonishes, "must deal with the situation as it exists." That situation is one in which the working class is kept in ignorance and confusion of its own social position and innocent of its latent social power to reconstruct society on a socialist footing. Immediacy lacks, in other words, a socialist consciousness, the introduction of which is the specific role of the socialist movement and, where that is absent, of independent socialist intellectuals and activists. Socialist activity means—or has meant—imbuing the exploited and oppressed with an awareness of the fundamental reasons for their subjugation under capitalism, of their class strength, and of their need for self-reliance and class independence. It means urging them to organize and assemble in revolutionary parties to free themselves of all class rule by setting up a democratic working-class government and to use that government as a scaffolding for socialism. It demands awakening those suffering under the yoke of oppression, exploitation, and deprivation to the understanding that the material and intellectual means for constructing a truly free society exists and can be liberated by their own activity. And it insists on measuring the particular actions, tactics, and gains of the real movement not by the "gospel" of practical politics—as Luxemburg said—but by the real advances made to class organization, militancy, and self-confidence.

The realism celebrated as an alternative by Stephen fixes the given reality, delinks socialist activity from the complexity of the historical process, and treats that reality as the immutable framework of political

activity. “Either planetary issues...will have the *possibility* of being dealt with in the international arena through existing international institutions with the powers of sanctioning transgressors or they will assuredly not be dealt with at all.” Exactly in which existing international institutions does Stephen want us to place our confidence? The UN? NATO? The WTO? The IMF? The World Bank? How are these institutions able to counterbalance a world taking “shape in which wealth and resources are ever more inequitably distributed, political power is ever more surely devolving into the hands of transnational corporations, and petty ideologues are ever more confidently whipping up atavistic passions with the most barbaric consequences”? Stephen recognizes that these institutions that he deems “capable of furthering internationalism are now intertwined with capitalist interests and tend to privilege strong states over their weaker brethren.” It seems, however, to have escaped his notice that these arrangements float on a sea of international agreements such as GATT and NAFTA that fortify and reassert market forces. These international bureaucratic entities not only aggravate the very ills he wishes to rectify, but do so by *expanding* and *deepening* the power of the executive branch over the legislature. The net effect is the further atrophying of the liberal state as a meaningful focal point for delivering concessions to the oppressed, which is precisely the active *democratic* function Stephen most ardently prizes. Support for these institutions in effect nullifies his earlier stated purpose of “mitigating the whip of the market through the state and abolishing the exercise of arbitrary power by the state.”

* * *

Stephen’s other objection to socialism as an historical alternative is rooted in the tragedy of actual working-class experience, or at least in an implied interpretation of that experience. The question is raised about the lessons of the Russian Revolution, a revolution whose libertarian aims were clearly to establish a society free from class domination and state authority, but which drifted into repression, authoritarianism, and, ultimately—though clearly not seamlessly—plunged into totalitarianism. Curiously, Stephen thinks this question a persistent irritant, but of minor intrinsic importance, since “Leninism is as dead

as doornail everywhere other than among the sects that are reminiscent of antagonistic amoeba fighting each other to death in a drop of water." Stephen similarly gives no quarter to the "theoretical conquests" of Third Camp socialists ("ultra-left Bolsheviks") concerning the Stalinist overthrow of the Russian Revolution, extolling instead the "partisans of Social Democracy and critical theory." Thus neither in opposition, nor in power or defeat, neither in practice nor in theory, is there anything truly redeemable for Stephen in the Leninist tradition of revolutionary socialism.

This is a harsh judgment. Yet one cannot help speculating as to where these great theoretical conquests of Social Democracy are documented. Karl Kautsky, long the leading authority of "orthodox" Social Democracy, characterized the Soviet Union as one of state-slavery, and as of Asiatic Despotism, as Bonapartist, and as fascist, and finally as a new form of state despotism, without providing any new insights into the character, historical role, or significance of the *Stalinist* bureaucracy. The famous exponent of Austro-Marxism, Otto Bauer, for all his misgivings about the Bolshevik Revolution, was Stalinism's lawyer foreseeing the revival of democracy arising from the five-year plans. Theodore Dan, prominent Left Menshevik, looked forward to the postwar unification of Social Democracy with Stalinism. Rudolf Hilferding's dissection of the "totalitarian state economy," while a trenchant and withering critique of state capitalism, seems a tad deficient in explicitly denying an *independent* class role to the Stalinist bureaucracy. As to Dan's comrade Rafael Abramovich's postwar characterization of Stalinist society as . . . well, "totalitarian," one would think this hardly worthy of classification as a "theoretical conquest." Prior to the Second World War, he and Friedrich Adler, in contrast to Kautsky, asserted the potentially socialist nature of the socioeconomic base of Stalinist Russia insisting that it contained the positive germs of socialism. The only Social Democratic exception to this dismal display is the little known work of Lucien Laurat, whose *Marxism and Democracy* touched in introductory but innovative fashion on the confluent themes of bureaucratic collectivism.

As for critical Marxism, one might search in vain for Lukács's unlikely breakthroughs given his contention that one could not criticize Stalin without aiding Hitler. Korsch's equation of Hitlerism with Stalinism as twin forms of state capitalism more or less summarizes

the sum total of his vast historical departures. Of his subsequent flirtation with Maoism, the less said the better. Perhaps their intellectual heirs added to our understanding of Stalinism and did so without political compromise with the two camps of class rule and imperialist expansion. If so, it is curious that their contributions have yet to register on any intellectual radar scan.

* * *

Stephen is being a bit facile, to say the least, in his comprehensive dismissal of Leninist relevancy. The Russian Revolution and its fateful course dominated the twentieth century and alternative historical interpretations of that experience conceal nothing so much as divergent political programs. The program that Stephen identifies with and defends is Social Democracy. Referring to the interwar period, Stephen admonishes:

Liberalism was disintegrating and Communism was becoming increasingly authoritarian. . . . With the suppression of the Spartacus Revolt, and the reactionary radicalization of the middle strata and the peasantry, there was not the least *practical* glimmer of hope for introducing councils. Whatever its vacillations and timidity, Social Democracy was not the principal “cause” for the victory of fascism. It steadfastly resisted the totalitarianism of both Left and Right in the name of republican democracy.

Stephen understands Social Democracy as being ultimately doomed to a hopeless rearguard action against overpowering odds, but refuses to accept, much less assess its own culpability for the ignominious downfall that awaited it. But the German and the Russian Revolutions were the two great contrasting tests of political power, of state and revolution, two historical laboratories whereby the perspective and momentous implications of the divergent political programs of socialism were empirically played out. The Social Democrats of Germany, and not just Germany, but Austria and Italy—the future locus of fascism, far from directing the working classes to grasp the power that was falling into its hands, instead crushed in servile collaboration with their respective bourgeoisies, socialist revolution in its shell. They did

so as the great defenders of liberal democracy, a liberal democracy that, in the case of Germany, was to include, with the consent of the reformist Social Democrats, a constitution so flawed that it could be set aside by means of its own provisions.

Stephen invokes Luxemburg to indict Lenin, insisting that what is “*salient for the present* is . . . her insight that terror always produces a dynamic that, once turned on, can’t be shut off like a water faucet.” I’m not sure where—in the present, that is—socialists face the choice of wielding terror either in defense of a liberal republic (or one in the making) *against* the working class, or in defense of its own revolutionary social order. But by raising the issue of “terror” in so one-sided a fashion, with blinders for Social Democratic terrorism, Stephen is clearly ducking the question of power and class rule, the question of for whom and against whom; the question of fighting for socialism when the opportunity presents itself, or fighting a hopeless rear-guard action after having insured that the moment had passed. What is significant and what is just as significantly overlooked is that for Luxemburg *as much as* for Lenin, revolution is the price exacted from humanity to avoid the even more frightful prospects of stagnation and decay that otherwise seizes and convulses society with alarming and foreseeable regularity. I see little in the dismal history of the past century that refutes that proposition. The question of terror, like the question of war, and the resort to violence in general, is a horrific and dreadful political tactic—an option that only socialism can seriously aim to put an end to. But our attitude as socialists to terror as to any given war is conditioned in the first instance by our evaluation of the politics from which the application of violence is an extension. It is always a question of historical relativism, never of moral indifference. This does not mean that as a socialist I feel duty bound to defend terror, or any other specific policy of the Bolshevik Revolution, only that my primary criterion of support is determined by their political *program*.

It may be argued, and Stephen does in effect argue, that Germany and Russia could not be evaluated as the test of two divergent social propositions since the Bolshevik Revolution was not and could never have been about socialism. “Whenever a Communist party has identified socialism with industrialization, *which is all that it can do when the revolution takes place in an economically underdeveloped nation*, the

result (in practice if not in theory) has been either authoritarianism like in Cuba or totalitarianism like in China.” This marvelously teleological formulation, which seemingly connects Stalinism with Leninism as its progeny rather than as its undertaker, fails as a generalization for two reasons. First, because the Bolsheviks, unlike the Castroites and Maoists, were a genuinely democratic—yes, democratic—revolutionary *workers’* party, which bore nothing in common with the class composition, political aims, internal life, or historical forces that shaped Stalinism and the worldwide movement whose allegiance Stalinism attracted. And second, because the Bolshevik Revolution unfolded as a specific, functional component within a broader European political and historical context. It cannot be evaluated as a free-floating historical archetype algebraically reduced to and equated with disparate national upheavals existing in diametrically opposed contexts, simply by arbitrarily singling out the alleged commonality, overstated in any case, of relative levels of economic development.

My point is simply this. The Bolshevik Party, being of sound mind and stern kidney and having more than a fleeting familiarity with the basic tenets of Marxism, harbored no delusion that socialism could be built in isolation from the shambles of Czarist Russia. But they did come to see, as Rosa had so presciently predicted after the 1905 revolution, that there was a special link between Germany and Russia. “The most backward country, just because it has been so unpardonably late in producing its bourgeois revolution, can show the proletariat ways and means for further class struggle both in Germany and the most advanced capitalist countries.” Even Kautsky as far back as 1902 had stated as much. “The epicenter of revolution,” he proclaimed, “has been moving from the West to the East. In the first half of the nineteenth century it was situated in France, at times in England. In 1848 Germany entered the ranks of the revolutionary nations. . . . Now the Slavs. . . join their ranks, and the center of gravity of revolutionary thought and action is shifting. . . to Russia.” “Russia, having taken over so much revolutionary initiative from the West, may now in turn become a source of revolutionary energy for the West.” This was the common currency of the European Marxist Left. In 1909 Kautsky could confidently intone that the working-class movement of the West need no longer fear “*premature* revolution.” For in the event that “war should break out, the proletariat is, at the

present time, the class that can look forward to its outcome with the greatest confidence.” Against this intellectual and political backdrop, Lenin and his comrades had every right to insist that the revolutionary extraction of Russia from war opened the prospect of revolution in Germany. “They were the *only* internationalist tactics, because they were based, not on the cowardly fear of world revolution . . . but on a correct (and before the war, a universally accepted) *estimation* of the revolutionary situation in Europe. These tactics were the only internationalist tactics, because they did the utmost in one country *for* the development, support and awakening of the revolution *in all countries*.” Bolshevik tactics were rationalized on this basis alone and not on the impossible nationalist perspective of socialism in one country, which was a later Stalinist perversion that Stephen has all too hastily mis-associated with Leninism. Socialist revolution, consistent revolutionaries maintained, might be initiated by Russia, but it could only be sustained and brought to fruition in the West.

To the list of achievements of Western socialism, esteemed by Stephen for having established “republics with socialist majorities in so many nations where none had existed before,” might be appended one ignominious detail. They left the Bolshevik Revolution in the lurch, to rot in isolation. Perhaps, too, “It was with these republics that the process of democratic education took its first faltering steps.” But if this meant, as it apparently did in the interwar years, inculcating the belief that the liberal republic could solve their basic problems, the education of the working class was, shall we say, incompetently handled on every level. The connection between Social Democracy’s abandonment of the early Soviet Republic and its fealty to bourgeois democracy at the expense of revolution, two sides of the same proposition—this “parliamentary cretinism,” which Luxemburg condemned for being “yesterday a weakness . . . today an equivocation . . . tomorrow a betrayal of socialism”—contributed as enormously as all the mistakes of the Bolsheviks combined for the rise of totalitarianism.

* * *

Stephen proposes to reduce events played out on a world stage instead to the one-sided deficiencies of Leninist doctrine:

How about instead looking at the institutions introduced by Lenin, the mechanistic transformation of his theory of rule, his inability to imagine [!] the constraints imposed by economic underdevelopment, his substitution of not simply the party for the class, but his identification of the party with the state, and his willingness to unleash a dynamic of terror that began with other parties, extended to other institutions like trade unions, impacted upon anarchists and socialists of good will, and ultimately would end up destroying every critical “faction” within the party itself.

Stephen is motivated by the completely laudable commitment, and one which every socialist should reaffirm, to a socialism where “the freedom of the individual cannot be arbitrarily subordinated to the whims of the state or the exigencies of any institution.” Lenin, too, in his *State and Revolution* conceived of socialism without any oppressive government machinery, without a privileged bureaucracy standing “separated from the people (and) elevated above it.” He drew up a vision of the “proletarian dictatorship” as a semistate, a state without a standing army and police; a state without a bureaucracy; a state constituted by a “people in arms” progressively dissolving into society and determined to realize its own extinction. Yet the regime that the Bolsheviks gave birth to would rapidly devolve into a sick, bureaucratized state—as Lenin and Trotsky themselves often affirmed. It was not the fulfillment of their conception of what socialism should be or could be.

The Bolshevik regime was ruling by the seat of its pants. Stephen leaves the reader with the inference that Bolshevism had a fundamental commitment to one-party rule, that its political appetites were at bottom fundamentally authoritarian and that these unsavory predilections blossomed in the context of economic backwardness. But the prerevolutionary history of the Party bears scant evidence for that thesis, nor is such a principle to be found in the Soviet constitution. Prerevolutionary Bolshevism was hardly monolithic, often riven with internal dissent, rival tendencies, and unruly factions. Even during the Civil War, Bukharin’s Left Communists operated as if they were a separate political party. The Lenin who issued the famous *April Theses* stood virtually as a minority of one within the organization. Unfortunately, the history of controversies that swirled and enveloped

internal Bolshevik life, routinely settled—and by democratic deliberation not by frame-ups and political murders—would be too cumbersome to detail. Suffice it to say that the question of the seizure of power, of Brest-Litovsk, of the Polish campaign, of the introduction of the New Economic Policy, and the trade union controversy were all decided by party congresses with all conflicting standpoints aired and represented. On the eve of the revolution and soon after it had taken place, the Bolsheviks attempted in vain to enlist the support of the Social-Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks. There was no evidence that they wished to or intrigued to govern alone. But the S-Rs and the Mensheviks disqualified themselves by the simple and unambiguous expedient of turning their guns against the revolution. Even the disenfranchisement of the bourgeoisie, which had never been recommended in advance by the Bolsheviks and played no part in their prerevolutionary programs, arose as well, as Lenin maintained, “spontaneously in the course of the fight.”

In November of 1917, the Central Committee of the Party declared that it is “excluding nobody from the Second All-Russian Soviet Congress and is entirely ready, also now, to admit those who departed and to recognize a coalition *with* them inside the Soviets, that, consequently, the assertions that the Bolsheviks do not want to share the power with anybody are absolutely false.” It followed that decree several days later with the proclamation that “in Russia the Soviet power has been conquered and the transfer of the government from the hands of one Soviet party into the hands of another Soviet party is possible without any revolution, by means of a simple decision of the Soviets, by means of simple reelection of the Soviets.” As far along as 1921, the regime tolerated the semilegal existence of those Left Mensheviks, anarchists, and Social-Revolutionaries who confined their expression of opposition to nonmilitary means. Several soviets were led by these parties and soviet elections were carried out with multiparty slates. But by this time, the ranks of the revolutionary proletariat had been thinned by years of war and the collapse of the economy and demoralized by the social disintegration, chaos, and ruin that had set in. Revolutionary relief from abroad was not forthcoming, and the regime, which never saw itself as much more than a revolutionary citadel, found itself ever less capable of regeneration from below.

It was this isolation that led to the introduction of the New Economic Policy. But the introduction of state-capitalism, capitalism under the guidance of a workers' state—a retreat and concession to other social forces made necessary by the abandonment of the revolution on the part of the Western working classes—raised the prospect that the Nepman (incipient capitalists) and the peasantry would avail themselves of existing parties, and if that were precluded, of organized factions within the ruling party to overthrow the new social order. At this point, the Bolsheviks attempted to square the circle: to outlaw, as a temporary expedient, parties and factions, while insisting that an active interchange between the masses and state institutions, trade unions and cooperatives, was still possible. They reassured themselves that in this *possibility* lay the ultimate guarantor of the social dominance of the working class. They were buying time. But more disastrously, they were creating a political and social vacuum. For the only counterweight to the burgeoning influence of the party's administrative apparatus was precisely the *organized* power of the masses that had, of necessity, found expression primarily in the very party factions but also in the semilegalized parties now outlawed. By shattering and atomizing this power, by insuring that whatever pressure could be brought to bear against bureaucratic autonomy was diluted and ineffective, the party enfeebled its internal democratic life, disarming both itself and the working class. The road was paved for its subsequent overthrow by the bureaucracy wresting itself free of control from below, firmly embedded in collectivized property and increasingly structured as a class under the leadership of Stalin. But it was not the mistakes of the Bolsheviks alone that caused the downfall of working-class Russia. The revolutionary regime failed to hold on to power in Russia primarily because the working classes failed to take power in the West.

Stephen concludes with a sweeping dismissal of the Bolshevik experience. But it was this experience *alone* that proved, and for all time, that the working class could conquer political power. It proved as well and with horrific consequences that there is no way other than through the consistent application and deepening of democracy that such power, once attained, can be defended. And it is in this context that Luxemburg, the implacable champion of democratic rights and

freedoms *and* of revolutionary politics, remains *in concert* with the Russian Revolution a beacon of socialist enlightenment.

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The world, until recently, was constituted by a tripartite class struggle in which the conflict between capitalism and Stalinism overshadowed and eclipsed that of independent working-class politics. Labor loyalties were largely split between the two major camps of class rule, though predominantly in favor of capitalism. The welfare state, which came to dominate the scene, was a result of a particular intersection of events: the prolonged postwar boom predicated on the destruction of capital values in the depression and war combined with forced savings extracted from the purchasing power of the working classes. This allowed accumulation to proceed with sufficient fat to make possible a series of concessions needed to retain the loyalty of the Western working masses. As the Communist empire was imploding, the falling rate of profit already in evidence by the late 1960s was intensifying, crushed by unmanageable welfare and military overhead costs. This culminated in the exhaustion of the Western economies. The emerging, yet fragile, economic recovery of the past decade, based on the globalized squeeze of working-class living standards needed to ratchet up the rate of exploitation, does not hearken well for the preservation, much less the expansion of the welfare state. Stephen worries about the degeneration of the reformist impulse and warns against “defrosting an institutional vision from the last century.” Yet his vision of the particular liberal republic shaped and conditioned by the unique experiences of the postwar world may prove to be nonreproducible. Perhaps it might do well to heed the traditional Russian saying and not spit into the well from which you may again have to drink.

CHAPTER 8

Moving On: New Replies to New Critics

Stephen Eric Bronner

I am, of course, delighted that my little article on Rosa Luxemburg titled “Red Dreams” should have generated such controversy concerning the status and meaning of socialism. My previous encounter with David Camfield and Alan Johnson has now inspired a debate with Paul Le Blanc and Barry Finger—important representatives of what might be termed “councilist Leninism” and valuable contributors to *New Politics*—as well as Michael Thompson, who, having published an impressive list of scholarly articles before he began *Logos*, is among the best minds of a younger generation concerned with appropriating the socialist legacy. Again, though there might prove to be a bit of redundancy, I would like to deal with each of them separately: it is, I think, the best way to do justice to their arguments and, through an immanent critique, better develop my own.

I would like to begin with Michael Thompson, not merely because we are basically in political agreement, but because some philosophical disagreements may actually be more semantic than substantive in nature, and derive from a lack of clarity on my part. Before going into what might be seen as a philosophical excursus, however, let me endorse the criticisms introduced by Michael concerning the salience

of workers' councils as an alternative institutional form for the modern era. He is right: councils have traditionally been understood as representative only of workers; limited sectional interests from other strata have rarely been taken into account by theorists of the councils; and even a cursory reading of the historical record does indeed make clear that councils have only emerged under circumstances in which liberal republics were absent. Michael is also correct, in my opinion, when he suggests that the obsession with councils inhibits the development of socialist ideas and that they lack any appeal for modern workers. Michael himself, however, should probably have been more specific concerning the alternative institutions he supports for extending democracy into the economic sphere.

But let me turn to something else: it seems that there is a misunderstanding of what I meant by my call to privilege the "political" over the "economic." That claim only makes sense in tandem with my insistence upon privileging the contingent over the scientific and the ethical over the teleological in what was intended as an immanent critique of Marxism. The purpose was to explode the "teleological suspension of the ethical," employing the phrase Kierkegaard used against Hegel, and transform the philosophical priorities. There was never any question of dismissing economics or social scientific findings from the analysis. To the contrary: my particular brand of socialist theory was, from the first, intended to link principles with interests. Thus, I don't quite understand why Michael should think that I want to divorce political ideals from policy construction.

My notion of the class ideal, which seeks to unify the interests of working people in existing social movements and progressive organizations without privileging any in particular, can only be effective when translated into policy proposals. Insofar as my general theory privileges contingency over the certainties associated with the "science" of Marxism, moreover, I harbor no illusions about the translation of theory into practice. There is indeed no reason to believe that radical reforms will be realized by politics though there is also no reason to believe that they can be realized by economics: there is no substitute for a movement. The question is the terms in which radical activists will understand the need to confront existing constraints

and the “objective” and “scientific” assumptions of classical political economy. Economics can surely provide insights into the constraints of the moment or the structure in which politics must operate. If critical economics provides the diagnosis and policy prescriptions, however, politics remains the surgeon who introduces them into the body politic.

But, still, I applaud Michael’s emphasis upon the need for a *critical political economy* and I accept the suggestion that the extent to which we detach critical political economy from socialist politics is the extent to which the radicalism of the latter is undermined. What differentiates critical from classical political economy, however, is the willingness of the former to illuminate the values hidden within the cost-benefit thinking of the latter. Normative assumptions are implicit within any form of economics. Critical political economy, however, should make them explicit: its undertaking is indeed predicated on a set of humanistic norms that were probably elaborated with more force by Kant than by Marx. I don’t think that Michael would disagree with this. It might even be the case that we are saying the same thing in different ways. I don’t wish to deny that freedom is the insight into necessity, which incidentally for Hegel meant precisely the primacy of the political in transforming reality, or that overcoming existing problems requires their scientific analysis. My point was only, in keeping with Hegel and Marx, that politics is the vehicle for translating the innovations of critical economics into forms of social intervention.

What are the parameters for such intervention? The question whether calls for the 40-hour week or enfranchisement of blacks are “socialist in nature” is a red herring: workers during the Russian Revolution of 1905 certainly considered the former to be the case and formal equality among workers is obviously the precondition for any serious notion of class solidarity. The “boundary conditions” of modern capitalism and what reforms the liberal state *can* or is *willing* to accommodate, by the same token, will vary with historical circumstances. Given the collapse of teleology, again, no social theory can simply assume it will “grip the masses.” This indeed is why the defense of reform and liberal democracy must take center stage and why the best slogan for any modern understanding of socialism is not

“there is an alternative,” let alone “all power to the soviets,” but *la lotta continua*.

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As far as actual life is concerned, the political state especially contains in all its modern forms the demands of reason, even where the political state is not yet conscious of socialistic demands.

Karl Marx

I appreciate very much the intelligent comments and generous words of Paul Le Blanc. I also understand his preference for the Luxemburg biography of Paul Frölich. The first biography of a major figure, especially when the biographer knew the person, is often the most engaging: I'll confess my favorite biography of Karl Marx, for which Luxemburg wrote the chapters dealing with economics, is still the study by Franz Mehring. More salient to our debate, however, is that Paul recognizes the original intention of my short speech on Rosa Luxemburg. It was not to turn her into Eduard Bernstein or simply invalidate her ideas in the historical context of her time, but to separate what remains salient in her thought from what is tainted by the anachronistic assumptions of an anachronistic method. To this end, in dialectical fashion, I attempted to employ the same form of *immanent criticism* she employed against Marx, and that he employed against figures ranging from Hegel to Proudhon, against her. I completely agree that she herself would probably not have accepted most of the positions that emerged. But that is not the point. Paul is correct when he writes:

[Rosa Luxemburg] lived and wrote and acted in a context in which mass working-class movements throughout Europe were animated by socialist ideas and history crackled with revolutionary possibilities. It is silly to allow ourselves the day-dream—when we read her words or think about her life—that this defines our own reality.

If this is really the case, however, then the implications must be drawn in theory and practice. And here, perhaps in the name of comradely unity, Paul is too quick in dismissing what differentiates my position

from that of my critics. The roots of the problem, I think, lie in the justifications he provides for his own “authentic Leninism.” I already discussed the philosophical dangers of employing an ahistorical notion of “authenticity” for dealing with Marx in “Rosa Redux.” The same argument becomes even more pertinent with respect to Lenin: perhaps his thinking need not prove totalitarian, but it has surely been authoritarian in every version in which it has been tried.

What authenticity boils down to under these circumstances is that the “authentic” Lenin, or Marx, becomes the one that the contemporary interpreter likes: the others, even if they have received much more forceful historical expression, are “inauthentic” because he or she doesn’t like them. But I sense that Paul is himself uncomfortable with this kind of sophistry and, thus, he can note that his justifications for Leninism are “hardly the exclusive property of Lenin.” But if that is so, and words have any meaning, what makes this particular form of Leninism “authentic”?

To discuss Leninism without making reference to the vanguard party and the party-state, his understanding of national self-determination and his particular theory of imperialism, his idea of ethics and revolution, is tantamount to not discussing Leninism at all. That is probably why I mostly agree with the sentiments expressed by Paul: they are justified neither by the theory of Marx or Lenin nor by any reference to history. This becomes evident in his views on the creation of a “socialist” society by a “militant” and “dynamic” working-class majority unconcerned with electoral politics. Given his obvious erudition, in this regard, it bothers me that he does not say a word about what social forces are powering the creation of this “militant” and “dynamic” majority; what kind of organization should coordinate its diverse constituents; or what institutions will protect the minority in the new socialist society and make it more free than the old parliamentary republic. In the same vein: while noting that decisions on foreign affairs should be made on a case by case basis, and fully admitting how humanitarian slogans can be employed for exploitative ends, I did say that the only available institutions capable of furthering internationalism are intertwined with capitalist interests. Paul Le Blanc seems to disagree with my emphasis upon working through them and other existing organizations. But, whatever Luxemburg might have thought, he doesn’t

indicate any alternative options. Without confronting issues of this sort unfortunately, we are once again left with a romantic “faith” that leaves the discussion over socialist strategy precisely where it was before this debate began.

There should be no misunderstanding: I agree that the liberal capitalist state, whether of the American or European variety, privileges capital. I don’t “pretend” it isn’t so. Quite the contrary: I have given my views on capitalist democracy and stated, quite frankly, that the satisfaction of capitalist economic interests in this system is the precondition for the satisfaction of all other interests.¹ I am also aware that the pursuit of economic reforms is becoming evermore difficult in the era of globalization. But the implications generated by the real history of revolutions are unavoidable: I am not willing to countenance the exchange of liberty for what have always been the tawdriest forms of equality. I also have the right to fear such an exchange if my critics refuse to provide any institutional guarantees that such an exchange won’t take place whatever the purity of their intentions in striving for workers’ councils and an “authentic” socialism.

Saving socialism from the junk heap of history requires the articulation of historical and political reasons for preserving it. It may have been tactless to suggest that my critics represent a tiny minority of a small minority and that no one ever listens to them. But the question is whether what I said is true—and, in my opinion, why it is true. Paul is surely correct when he notes that “the Marxist analysis of capitalism remains powerful, while the perspective of revolutionary working-class struggles is in a shambles.” But, if that is indeed the case, then it is necessary to draw the *political* consequences. There is much in the economic theory of Marx—especially the theory of the omnivorous commodity form and its fetishism outlined in *Das Kapital*—that retains its salience. With the failure of the old teleology, however, I believe that the idea of “revolution” has been robbed of the *strategic* privilege it was always given against what were understood as the *tactics* of “reform” by Luxemburg, Lenin, and the rest of the Left.

Revolution can no longer be considered the ultimate goal, of what Lukács called the “categorical imperative,”² of the labor movement. The breakdown of teleology has instead reduced it to just another

tactic. With one difference: revolution has never been acceptable to the majority of the working class in nations with a liberal democracy. Could someone *please* finally tell me why not? Are workers too stupid to know that their interests are subordinate to those of big business? Does the system simply repress their *true* desires? Or is it instead that the system meets some of their needs and not all—thereby creating a situation in which workers have more to lose than their chains—while the ultra-left ignores the new developments, locks its political imagination into an anachronistic notion of workers' councils, and underestimates the value of both reform and the freedom offered by liberal democracy?

All of my critics have expressed their willingness to support reform and even liberal democracy even though they wish to go *beyond* such politics. But how? For my part, I simply don't see the democratic moment in Lenin: he never thought about placing constraints on the power of the party; he never valued civil liberties or an independent judiciary; and he never treated any actor outside the party other than in terms of pure expediency. His vanguard organization was, from the first, hierarchical and militaristic and his notion of "democratic centralism" always lacked any notion of institutional accountability to those whom the party was to represent. Rosa Luxemburg already underscored all of this in "The Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy" (1904).

Under any circumstances, however, none of my "Leninist" critics have recognized the crucial insight of Lenin that was also made by Roberto Michels and others: the same organization dedicated to reform will not be able to make a revolution. The bureaucratic and ideological requirements for one are not the same as the other. Under authoritarian or fascist rule, where there is no possibility for a redress of grievances and civil liberties are disregarded, the need for revolution remains. But that is not the situation that pertains in the Western states, and the last *real* revolutions we have witnessed, those in Eastern Europe, were undertaken from the first with an eye on a liberal republic. If the decision is to be made to work for reforms in practice then the revolutionary theory with its pathetic slogans must be abandoned; on the other hand, if the revolutionary ideal is to be maintained, then the revolution must be promoted within existing organizations through a cadre or vanguard group. My critics can't

have it both ways: the world, as I put it earlier, was not constructed to meet the demands of your politics.

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He wants all or nothing. Often I think, when faced with this choice, the world happily answers: nothing.

Bertolt Brecht

Turning to Barry Finger, whose piece exhibits both passion and sincerity, there is much with which I disagree and perhaps even more that I don't understand. My purpose was never to turn Luxemburg into a liberal. It is here a matter of method, and the issue is not whether she would have approved with the positions I developed from my immanent critique. My connection with her thinking is in line with the issues she highlighted—internationalism, political liberty, economic equality, and the tension between organization and base—rather than the specific interpretations of these concerns that she advocated in the context of her time. One more time: just as Luxemburg employed the method of Marx against various positions taken by him, I used the critical method against her. With regard to the question of whether I am a “Luxemburgist,” which Barry apparently considers important, let me ask: Was Marx a “Hegelian”?

Barry seems to assume that the critical method always moves “left” as if the question concerning human freedom had been answered before any institutional or political questions were ever raised.³ History can often change what was once “left” into what is now “right” and vice versa. Let me give a concrete example: the demand for a 40-hour week and 2-week vacations were already considered part of the reformist agenda by the time Hitler took power. But these reforms instituted by the Popular Front served as the basis for the charge of treason, insofar as they supposedly economically weakened France, against Leon Blum when he was put on trial by the Vichy Government. These tame little reforms suddenly assumed a new symbolic value. Then, too, Margaret Thatcher turned the poll tax into a modern issue. And in the present neoliberal context, the reforms about which Barry is so cavalier—despite the obligatory statement about their “importance”—can be considered in the same way.

Barry, indeed, approaches the matter differently: forget any connection with material reality, it is enough to find the appropriate quotation—from Luxemburg, or Lenin, or myself—and get ready to rumble. This becomes evident in the three quotations that, in keeping with the old model of the Third and Fourth Internationals, were taken from my writings without sense of the context in which they were written or—far more important—any concern with which better applies to the contemporary context. The specter of heresy looms over his entire essay: Barry notes that there is, for example, the “whiff of suspicion” regarding my revisionism. *Mea culpa!* I believe Marx and Luxemburg—and Bernstein—need revision: any other position leads to dogmatism. I have no problem with saying that I learned a great deal from Eduard Bernstein,⁴ who incidentally can legitimately be interpreted as employing the historical method of Marx against the conclusions reached by the master, or admitting to overlaps in our views beyond what I hope, by now, can be recognized as sharp differences.

It is also perhaps time to say something about the famous line by Eduard Bernstein that “the movement is everything, the goal is nothing.” I have never quite understood the horror with which modern materialists greet this obviously anti-metaphysical statement. If you believed in the Marxian science and its teleology of history more than a century ago then, admittedly, the abhorrence for such revisionism is clear-cut: such are the terms in which Luxemburg engaged her adversary and confronted the challenge he raised. But if you are a modern materialist and you don’t believe in the old scientific teleology—a point about which my critics seem to waffle with incredible non-chalance—then the revolutionary “goal” of socialism can obviously retain nothing more than a contingent status and it must be subjected to historical criticism. Without teleological backing, the goal of socialism becomes anchored in nothing more than ethical commitment, or *faith*, a development that Luxemburg devoutly feared, but to which Barry seems to subscribe, since he offers no evidence relevant to modern conditions for his belief in workers’ councils, the revolution, or Marxism.

Indeed, when Barry calls me “cynical,” he gives away the game. Even his wonderful last sentence referring to the resurrection of “genuine” or—dare I say it—“authentic” Leninism is peppered with words

like “perhaps,” “might,” and “may.” The sacred “goal” of “revolution,” of “socialism,” thereby becomes little more than an ethical claim. It becomes evident then that “perhaps” the longed for resurrection of Leninism “might” not take place and we “may” have to deal with my liberal republic. It can go one way and another, too. But this only begs the question: *Which is the better bet?* Especially if you are pushing revolution, calling upon workers surely to sacrifice economically and “perhaps” politically in a dramatic way, don’t you think answering that question directly might not be a bad idea? Under circumstances in which the “goal” retains nothing more than a purely ethical status, becomes the object of what can only be considered metaphysical speculation, should materialists not privilege the actual concerns of the labor movement?

Barry is correct and clever in suggesting that reformist choices made by the old labor movement were once inspired by revolutionary aspirations. But that was because its representatives could show that Social Democracy was gaining force with each passing day: revolution became tied with reform; socialism with democracy; national parties with international ideals.⁵ This linkage, however, no longer exists. If I must choose between the wish for a revolutionary *other* and the possibility of reform within a capitalist democracy then, for me, the choice is obvious. And let’s not hear the old saw about “socialism or barbarism.” Other choices exist in between. History now forces us to choose between support for reform and rejection of it as well as the defense of liberal democracy against a rising tide of neofascism. I know already that for the ultra-left, making such choices involve difficult “decisions” that—even though reforms and liberal democracy are considered “valuable”—must be pondered deeply. Our materialists (*sic!*), I realize, have their principles! What does it matter that they remain unconnected with any real and pressing interests of working people? After all, for these very important political actors, it is not as if such “decisions” were really between being ever so slightly useful and evermore surely reactionary. Sometimes I really do feel that Max Horkheimer was right when he wrote: *les extremes se touchent*.

Enough of that: there is still the matter of the movement. Barry is right: it is impossible to put humpty-dumpty back together again and create a socialist movement along *any* of the old lines. But I never advocated that. I argued instead that socialists will have to work

within existing reformist organizations and new social movements: what will identify them is less an outmoded rhetoric than their ability to articulate programs and proposals capable of unifying the working-class elements in each of these organizations and movements without privileging any. Such is the class ideal: it can, I think, prove useful as a political corrective under contemporary circumstances when the whole of the Left is less than the sum of its parts and socialism still offers, if not a new set of institutions, a project concerned with constraining the arbitrary power of capital no less than the authoritarian tendencies within *any* state. No more. Whether any of this fits into some prefabricated definition of socialism or some completely abstract conception of “revolution” is, frankly, completely irrelevant to me.

Now: here we go again. You state that “without the democratic direction and control of social policy from below, humanity, even when it is for the moment well-fed and relatively secure, cannot be genuinely free.” Ignoring for the moment the phrase “well-fed and relatively secure,” which is a startling admission, can I ask whether this makes any sense? What choice is Barry actually asking us to make? Is it all or nothing? Good luck! Then, too, what precisely is the meaning of “democratic direction and control of social policy from below”? Or even better there is your call for “the wholesale introduction of civilized values to the common patrimony of humanity and [...] a social environment distinguished by the unique scope for the nourishment of the free and creative aspect of the individual personality that those values make possible.”

Barry, what are you talking about? Can’t you see that these phrases are just vagaries unless put in institutional terms. Or does such a suggestion rock your faith. In my former response I spoke about the difficulties faced by decentralized institutional arrangements of protecting civil liberties, sustaining production over time, assuring accountability, and ignoring checks and balances. You address none of this: it’s as if by offering some incantations, and waving the magic wand of revolutionary democracy. You say that I—not history but I—set up the choice between liberal democracy and authoritarianism: What is the material justification for your third alternative? Or is it that I must *believe* that there is one.

As a Leninist, should you not be willing to deal with what is obviously the greatest weakness of your own tradition? Not to acknowledge

it is to perpetuate it. In the same vein, without making any positive proposals of your own, you are quick to condemn the only international organizations that exist for dealing with transnational issues. You also buy into the silliness about these organizations expanding and deepening the power of the executive over the legislature, which, given the overriding commitment to the principle of “subsidiarity,” is certainly not true in the European Union and ludicrous with respect to the power exercised by powerful nation-states over the United Nations. I, too, oppose international organizations like the IMF, which strengthen markets, and I never viewed any international institutions as sacrosanct or in need of drastic reform.

Even the best international agencies didn’t do “enough,” of course, and the international revolutionary proletariat would undoubtedly have done a much better job. But things are as they are and, as things are, I am unwilling simply to dismiss the work of organizations like UNESCO or the United Nations Relief and Works Agency that has been virtually alone in providing support for the Palestinian refugees since 1948. Instead of lumping everything together under the rubric of “bourgeois,” indeed, it might be better to consider the words of Pierre Bourdieu: “One can be against a Europe which . . . would serve as a relay for financial markets, while being for a Europe which, through a concerted policy, blocks the way of the uncontrolled violence of those markets . . . Only a European social state would be capable of counteracting the disintegratory effects of monetary economics.”⁶

You say that you don’t want to be seen as “dismissive, sectarian, or flippant about bourgeois democracy.” But, Barry, words are cheap. That is exactly what you are in this piece. You can’t have it both ways: express an abstract admiration for what are concrete achievements and then call for its substitution by institutions that you won’t define. By the same token, you misconstrue my position: I have never arbitrarily attempted to separate the liberal state from its capitalist foundations: I understand the constraints. It is merely that the liberal state makes it possible to address the grievances and mitigate, if not eliminate, certain injustices perpetuated by capitalist elites. What is the problem with invigorating the mixed economy and fighting against the roll back of the welfare state, which you say yourself “in spirit, Marx might have celebrated,” if revolution lacks any materialist foundation and your democracy any serious institutional definition?

Of course, if you set up a utopian standard of democracy, all existing forms will prove wanting. But there is nothing particularly radical in that: Hannah Arendt set up a notion of politics derived from an ideal interpretation of the Greek *polis*, and Sheldon Wolin then went on to suggest that neither liberalism, nor fascism, nor Marxism, is “really” political. Fine if you want to argue that way: but don’t confuse this mode of thinking with Marxism or let it infect your reading of history. Under circumstances in which the labor movement languished under autocratic regimes, there was *no practical interest whatsoever* in bringing about a revolution beyond the revolution concerned with instituting a liberal republic. That was—for better or worse—what bothered Marx in “The Gotha Program,” what irritated Luxemburg once she had discovered the mass strike, and what ultimately justified Lenin in calling his people “communists.” The fact is that even the demand for a liberal republic, from fear of the authorities, was not explicitly mentioned in the early “programs” of German and Austrian Social Democracy. The problem with Bernstein, in this regard, was not his support for a bourgeois republic but his belief that socialism could evolve without any political transformation whatsoever. No problem: I am willing to recognize the gulf between my position and the “whole revolutionary socialist tradition.” It doesn’t really matter when “socialist revolution” and “councils” have become nothing more than mantras chanted by a few sectarians that actually help the existing order invalidate any serious commitment to socialist reform among the majority of working people.

You can, undoubtedly, find a few appropriate citations or exhortations for your position. But there was no one with real power in the movement—August Bebel, Wilhelm Liebknecht, Viktor Adler, Camille Huysmans, Georgi Plekhanov, or Jean Jaurès—seriously concerned with instituting something beyond the liberal-democratic state. I discussed the *concrete* differences between what was understood as the “socialist” as against the “liberal” republic when the issue became real following the First World War. Again, however, you don’t confront the implicit and explicit criticisms of your position: you only consider the problems with my own. I find no need to go through this same business again. But if I had to choose between accepting the present form of a liberal republic and calling upon workers to risk their livelihoods and their lives for a romantic vision of workers’

councils, which is unwilling to address any of the institutional problems I have raised, I would insist upon supporting the liberal republic *in the blink of an eye*. People should not be made to suffer for fantasies. With no disrespect meant, it might be appropriate for you to consider the remark of a young Nazi that Ernst Bloch often liked to recount: “One does not die for a program that one understands, one dies for a program that one loves.”⁷

Regarding how my position might have applied to Germany in 1919, I answered the question in the previous discussion. So, let me turn it around: If the majority of the working class opposed the call for soviets,⁸ which it did, would you—Barry—then be willing to impose it upon them by force? After all, you consider the working class “kept in ignorance.” Perhaps, once presented with the “truth” about workers’ councils by you and your merry little band, the majority would come around: but you obviously consider any real evidence for such an assumption unnecessary. I plead guilty to your contention that I have become a liberal captive of my antirevolutionary dogma. But then, “perhaps,” your argument unwittingly turns you into the authoritarian captive of your own antiauthoritarian dogma? My argument is consistent; it does not turn ends against means. But yours? Well...

Here, I think, it is necessary to say a word about those socialist thinkers whom Barry castigates. Before criticizing the inability to envision the Stalinist bureaucracy by Kautsky, who was absolutely correct in his basic characterization of the Communist future, you might want to consider that he wrote his *Dictatorship of the Proletariat* in 1919; you also might want to consider that Leon Blum could already speak about a “moral incompatibility” between Social Democrats and Communists in 1920. As you know, of course, Lukács—a genuine old Bolshevik who (inexplicably!) turned into a Stalinist—made his peace with the regime in 1924 and many of the later political analyses of Korsch, who became mired in sectarian preoccupations with workers’ councils and direct action from below after having been tossed out of the German Communist Party, were thin. Sure Otto Bauer was mistaken in his views though you neglect to mention that they reflected those of only a tiny minority within the movement. Most Social Democratic critics of the Russian Revolution pointed to the dearth of bourgeois democratic traditions, the paucity

of economic development, and the lack of Communist commitment to liberal values and institutions. They offered Marxist analyses of the ways in which Marxism was being put to use: that is historical materialism. As for the “independent class role of the Stalinist bureaucracy,”⁹ or “bureaucratic collectivism,” who other than a few Trotskyists ever considered them to be the defining characteristics of totalitarianism?

Had you even browsed the work of Max Weber, who understood bureaucracy as the rationalization of clearly delineated tasks among clearly delineated offices in order to foster administrative efficiency in terms of producing maximum output from minimum input, it would immediately have been obvious to you that neither the Stalinist nor the Nazi states were “bureaucratic” in any meaningful sense of the term. Quite the contrary: the totalitarian state is a bureaucratic mess in which, for precisely this reason, the secret police is able to undermine the independence of all intermediate associations in civil society that might deflect the exercise of coercive and ideological power by the *fuehrer*-state against individual citizens. Montesquieu understood the need for intermediate associations as well as checks and balances against the sovereign claiming to incarnate the will of the nation; Hegel described when what we like to call the “cult of the personality” becomes coupled with a “democracy,” undefined by institutions capable of protecting the minority, for what he somewhat naively termed the “absolute terror” of the French Revolution.¹⁰ But wait! Barry may be right! What do Montesquieu and Hegel *really* have to offer? They have not a word to say about *Stalinism*. The situation is no different for Kautsky and his friends as well as modern theorists of *totalitarianism* like Hannah Arendt or Franz Borkenau or Richard Lowenthal or Herbert Marcuse or Franz Neumann or Erich Fromm or Friedrich Pollock or Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.¹¹ These are all clearly intellectual lightweights compared to . . . Well, it doesn’t matter anyway. These great thinkers would obviously have been better served had they written *their* books with *you* in mind.

Now let’s talk about history. Regarding the revolutionary possibilities for Austria or Hungary in 1919, forget it. I agree that the revolution had a chance—if only a slim chance—in the Germany of 1919 and perhaps also in Italy during the early 1920s. But there is not a serious historian I know who suggests that power was “falling into

the hands” of the workers in the Germany of 1933,¹² let alone in the Austria of 1938 whose working class was still languishing from its unsuccessful militancy of 1934. An argument could be made that the SPD and KPD should have been more militant *in defense of the republic*, which I made myself,¹³ but there is—again—no serious historian I know who argues that the erection of councils was a possibility after 1923 at the very latest. According to Barry, I assume, this means we should end history there.

But isn't it time to get beyond 1923, or is it 1921, or is it 1918? I also have written about the historical conditions and constraints faced by Lenin. It was understandable for Luxemburg—desperate and broken¹⁴—to understand the beginnings of Lenin's terror in terms of the lack of support extended by European Social Democracy to the Russian Revolution. But, the twentieth century has now come to an end. It might be time to consider whether this completely partisan standpoint shifts the blame from those who did nothing to mitigate the disaster to those who actually instigated the disaster. There is also the question, rarely asked, why the Social Democrats (Kautsky, Bernstein, et al.), all of whom had been mercilessly and indiscriminately attacked by the Communists, should have extended support to a dictatorship whose degeneration they prophesized and whose methods they ethically opposed. Isn't that asking a bit much? Would Lenin have sent help to the Social Democrats if the situation were reversed? Which also begs the question: What kind of help could Social Democracy actually have offered? Europe had been destroyed by the First World War, the inflation in Germany would quickly prove legendary in its impact, the victorious allies would undoubtedly have interfered with any socialist intervention in the revolution, and—again—there is the minor problem that the *majority* of the European working class opposed the Communist dictatorship.

This latter issue is not exactly what I would call an “ignominious detail.” There are many points on which Barry and I disagree as comrades and friends, and some on which we even agree. But, frankly, I find his discussion of terror appalling. His relativistic argument justifying terror, sanctioned by nothing more than the belief of the true believer that his party is doing what its leaders *say* that it is doing, is a carbon copy of the murderous and delusional “ethics” offered by any number of old Bolsheviks. All of them were contemptuous of

liberal democratic values while they were in power and then invoked them when they were on the dock. But that doesn't seem to bother Barry. His arguments go far toward explaining why the majority of the European working class should have been skeptical about the Communist experiment. I was genuinely shocked by the combination of sheer arrogance and teleological rationalization implicit in the belief that "revolution is the price exacted from humanity to avoid the even more frightful prospects of stagnation and decay." This kind of talk *always* made my skin crawl.

It is absurd to suggest that Leninism must be deemed democratic because prior to the revolution, and during the civil war, the party was disorganized and somewhat contentious. This was a matter of historical intention rather than design. The question anyway is how the party treated its enemies, whether its theorists were ever concerned with its institutional accountability to the base, the rule of law, checks and balances, or the civil liberties of its opponents. Justifying such willful blindness in the name of the "revolution," especially when only one party is allowed to interpret its fate, results in nothing more than dogmatism. Indeed, regarding the matter of coalitions with other parties, I strongly suggest that Barry consider the recollections of Isaac Steinberg who led the only party, the "Left" Social Revolutionaries, with whom Lenin was briefly in alliance.

Barry is concerned that I leave the reader with the "inference" that Leninism seeks one-party rule. Inference? Yeah, right! I'm sure it's purely by accident that Leninism *has* produced *only* authoritarianism like in Cuba or totalitarianism like in China. Barry doesn't agree, which is his right, but isn't it incumbent upon him to provide a *single counterfactual example* in response to my position? His arguments about class composition also simply miss the point: there is such a thing as the internal dynamics of an institution beyond the external impact of the circumstances in which the given institution develops: Hegel, again, spoke about this explicitly, Weber built on his insights, and exponents of the "new institutionalism" highlight the notion of "path dependency." But dealing with non-Marxist theories is apparently irrelevant for the ultra-left: it seems enough to trot out the same old excuses and—in the wonderful phrase of Gunther Grass from his novel *The Flounder*—"talk about what would have been the case had the opposite happened."

More is required than *faith* that things can be different. The historical record is unambiguous: whatever the usefulness of Lenin's theory of the party with respect to fostering revolution, it stinks as a theory of rule. Every concrete experience of movements committed to Leninism has produced a one-party state with a varying, if generally horrible, set of authoritarian consequences. *Every one!* And it really is insufficient to claim that these *real* experiences of Leninism are irrelevant because the "authentic" Leninist party, which invented the party-state in the first place and introduced terror as a legitimate political tactic, had different intentions. *Please!* Isn't it time to move on? But wait! I almost forgot. We can't. Why not? Because "*for all time*"—no reification or idolatry taints this argument!—*we* must continue to bow down before the Russian Revolution: this event apparently *proved* that the working class could conquer power even though the real conquerors were Communist authoritarians that exercised power undemocratically in its name. No reactionary could have offered a better set of prescriptions for paralyzing the radical spirit. Needless to say, in closing, let me extend my thanks for what has been a terrific lesson in the critical use of historical materialism.

* * *

One cannot have socialism. One is a socialist.

Henry Pachter

History has withdrawn the identification of revolution with liberation and exploded the idea that socialism can serve as the absolute *other* to capitalism. Invoking the image of a workers' council that no one wants makes as little sense as insisting upon the need for a revolution that has everywhere turned into a nightmare. The debate is no longer between revolution and reform, as I suggested previously, but between those who support the reforms traditionally associated with social democracy and those who do not. The best of the socialist tradition was committed to constraining the arbitrary exercise of institutional power. This indeed is what links the liberal rule of law, with its universal implications for members of all classes and critics of any regime, to the particular demands of workers concerning the accountability of capital.

Where do liberal reforms stop and socialism begin? This is a question with which all the commentators seem concerned. But it can only be answered in the abstract. Sure: it's possible to say that the reforms achieved in the past have left the accumulation process intact, the dependence of workers on capital in place, that they have been "integrated" into the "system," and that the ruling class permits this because it is less costly than outright repression. But this kind of talk is a perfect example of "reification": it goes nowhere unless the critic can sketch a feasible alternative form of accumulation, maintain that the dependency of workers on capital is the same as it was in the time of Dickens, refuse to consider that perhaps it is not simply the reforms that have been integrated but the system itself that has been changed, and seriously believe that the actual historical struggles undertaken by capital against those reforms was merely for show. Indeed, if you can't recognize that the combination of all the reforms mentioned in all these essays has *qualitatively* changed the conditions under which working people live, if you consider it "delusional" to believe that the civil rights and social legislation of the 1960s tended to "fortify and broaden the existing democracy," then you are living in what Hegel termed "the night in which all cats are gray": such a stance is not "dialectical," or even radical, merely dogmatic.

The "limits of capitalism" have been shown to be extremely flexible and the old talk about the choice between "socialism" and "barbarism" ignores the various alternatives in between. Those in between are those among which, if we consider ourselves responsible political people, we *must* choose. All the reforms mentioned by Barry in his lengthy response were sponsored at one time or another by the labor movement. He and Paul and Michael are surely correct to note that some were also sponsored by middle-class reformist organizations. But so what? Time to deal with substance rather than slogans: the value of a reform does not lie with who proposes it, but whom it benefits.

Innovative proposals appropriate to diverse historical conditions or what André Gorz once termed "non-reformist reforms," no less than the energy with which they are promulgated, can alone differentiate libertarian socialists from the mainstream. They let radicals put something on the table, and enough evidence from the past suggests that they can have a *practical* influence. This is not the same as asking for workers' councils or, in what was a remarkable comment directed

against me by a member of the audience for one of my panels at the last Socialist Scholars Conference, a condition in which “each is responsible for everything.” What a delightful world of meetings that would be! It’s time to understand the difference between demanding utopia and reinventing an idea of what is feasible, but ignored, under existing circumstances. Identifying this difference, linking the feasible with the ignored, and illuminating the implications of the compromises undertaken by official social democratic parties committed to the “new middle” or the “third way,” are fundamental themes of my book *Imagining the Possible: Radical Politics for Conservative Times*.

The pursuit of reforms capable of constraining the arbitrary exercise of economic and political power by the state, and through the state, is—and perhaps always was—the primary purpose of socialism. Does this mean that the idea will essentially become identified with mitigating the whip of the market and expanding the realm of individual choice? I believe so. And so do most people. The idea of transforming the totality was an illusion from the beginning: workers were empowered and enfranchised less by the fantasy of the soviet than the reality of reforms associated with shortening the work week, introducing the right to collective bargaining, and participating in the liberal state. This does not suggest that socialism must somehow “evolve.” The twentieth century has taught us that the welfare state can be rolled back, that liberal democracy is fragile. With the collapse of teleology, moreover, no form of theory can any longer guarantee the translation of its injunctions into practice. Does this mean that the future is bleak and socialists will find themselves on the defensive? Undoubtedly—but that is the real situation in which we find ourselves and which we ignore at our peril.

Notes

1. Note my essay, “Transforming the State: Reflections on the Structure of Capitalist Democracy” in *Imagining the Possible: Radical Politics for Conservative Times* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 145ff.
2. Georg Lukács, “Tactics and Ethics,” in Rodney Livingstone ed., and Michael McColgan trans., *Political Writings 1919–1929* (London: New Left Books, 1972), p. 3ff.
3. Dialectics is not simply meant to confirm the position dear to its interpreter, but seeks instead “by means of an immanent critique to develop

philosophical standpoints beyond themselves and beyond the despotism of a thinking based on [fixed] standpoints.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 12.

4. This point evident in the classic biography that is far superior to what came before, I am proud to say, has been written by another of my former students. Note the study by Manfred B. Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism: Eduard Bernstein and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 75ff and passim.
5. Note the discussion in “Karl Kautsky: The Rise and Fall of Orthodox Marxism” in Stephen Eric Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, 2nd Edition (Boulder: Westview, 2001), p. 33ff.
6. Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 62.
7. Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 65.
8. The majority “above all wanted peace and stability. I saw Social Democratic demonstrators carrying large signs inscribed: ‘Ebert, Get Tough!’ When the Communists—at the time called Spartacists—seized the building of the Social Democratic daily *Vorwärts* in Berlin, we were all for law and order, along with Ebert and his mercenaries who quelled the uprising. The idea of occupying newspaper buildings was crazy and had no strategic value whatsoever. Paul Fröhlich, the biographer of Rosa Luxemburg and at the time a leading member of the Communist Party’s leading cadre, told me later that no one had given the order: he was convinced the uprising had been sparked by agents provocateurs. Rosa Luxemburg, too, knew that it was premature and ill-considered. But she could not allow the masses to make their own mistakes without interfering: she had to be with them, like a mother whose children threaten to wade into a treacherous pool.” Henry Pachter, *Weimar Etudes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 13–14.
9. This was always just a twist on an old theme. Engels had already noted that while the state is “as a rule, the state of most powerful, economically dominant class . . . By way of exception, however, periods occur in which the warring classes balance each other so nearly that the state power, as ostensible mediator, acquires for the moment, a certain degree of independence of both. Such was the absolute monarchy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which held the balance between the nobility and the class of burghers; such was the Bonapartism of the First, and still more of the Second French Empire, which played off the proletariat against the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie against the proletariat. The latest performance of this kind, in which ruler and ruled appear equally ridiculous, is the new German Empire of the Bismarck nation: here capitalists and workers are balanced against each other and equally cheated for the benefit of the impoverished

- Prussian cabbage junkers.” Frederick Engels, “The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* 3 vols. (Moscow, 1969), 3:328–29.
10. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Harper, 1967), p. 599ff.
 11. Again let me recommend the fine intellectual history by William David Jones, *The Lost Debate: German Socialist Intellectuals and Totalitarianism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).
 12. Exactly the opposite position is argued by the dean of left-wing German historians of the Weimar period. See Arthur Rosenberg, *Geschichte der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1961), pp. 210–11.
 13. Stephen Eric Bronner, “Working Class Politics and the Nazi Triumph” in *Moments of Decision: Political History and the Crises of Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 44–55.
 14. Alfred Doblin suggests that Luxemburg was actually suffering from nervous collapse in his novel, *Karl und Rosa* (Munich: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, 1978 ed.).

CHAPTER 9

Between Gospel and Church: Resisting the Canonization of Rosa Luxemburg

Amber Frost

In the interest of full disclosure, I am not an academic. My brief flirtation with graduate school yielded some compelling work in transnational feminisms, an extended sympathy to the most vulgar of Marxists, and enough exposure to academia to solidify my adamant position of avoidance whenever possible. My qualifications (or lack thereof, some might argue) to participate in this project are rooted in my presence among Marxist thinkers, far more than my own voice.

What I am, in fact, is an activist and “satellite socialist.” My membership in Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) has most commonly called upon me to moderate this forum or lead that youth workshop. Additionally, my employment for DSA is primarily secretarial duties—spreadsheets, correspondence, tracking, and mailings. My exposure to Rosa Luxemburg was rendered from fairly autodidactic pursuits—reading groups in the back of anarchist bookstores, generally attended by local punk rock anarchists and a local professor or two.

As one of two or three self-identified socialists in that context, and as a de facto housewife of DSA, my perspective on leftist discourse

will likely be unique in the context of the *New Politics* debate on Luxemburg. While I understand there is some deficit to my consumption of her work outside of a classroom setting, I think that the organic traditions of reading group deliberation from which I am informed can refresh what is often an academic echo chamber, one which I hope to deconstruct in the following piece.

* * *

In the course of dialectics in practice, it often appears (especially from my perspective, being one so frequently positioned as an arbiter to the debate) that the most we can hope for is to finely tune our disagreements to as tiny a nuance as possible, then battle to the death over the remaining minutia with the sort of passion usually only afforded to deep-seated familial feuds. However objective we claim to be, the tone and pacing of our rhetoric almost always seems to take on a context of orthodoxy versus evolution, or reformism versus ideological purity—ironically, a dichotomy thoroughly explored by Rosa Luxemburg herself. While not a generational divide in the sense of physical time, this dichotomy of “traditional” versus “evolutionary” is capable of descending into a sort of microsectarianism that yields nothing productive.

This pattern often becomes increasingly ineffectual when we (on the Left) attempt to evaluate the very architects of our political philosophy; in the case of Rosa Luxemburg, as with most of our revered minds, we’re charged with rendering meaning from her words, adapting them to an ever-changing historical landscape. In the presence of a plastic capitalism, adapted most recently to a particularly wily neoliberal beast, how do we avoid the inherent canonization of a (yes, fallible) figurehead, and the subsequent stagnation of her ideas, especially when her thought was far from brittle and rigid?

My sympathies immediately line up with Paul Le Blanc when he notes that “the comrades are—to a certain extent—arguing past each other: too much learning, too much knowledge, too many fine-tuned phrases getting in the way of identifying what’s really what in the world and how they see the world.” Accusations of anti-intellectualism are always railed at these sorts of criticisms, but I believe that in any attempt to at least fashion “better disagreements,” and, at our highest

goal, better failures at synthesis, we must make room for the possibility that participants are indulging in Freud's "narcissism of minor differences," and subsequently side-stepping more productive debate.

(I would also add that Le Blanc's background as an activist and in the party politics of revolutionary circles may be the reason for our shared perspective on the debates. With all due respect and the warmest of affections to my comrades informed largely by their place on the academic Left, as a working-class woman outside of the academy, I perceive these Freudian tendencies as far more a result of their particular leftist cultural legacy, rather than the inevitable result of the contentious debates, themselves.)

Dialectical discourse is a fumbling, sensitive business, so even when undertaken with the comradeliest good faith, we inevitably risk talking past one another. Regarding Stephen Eric Bronner's original piece and the ensuing conversations, I find it most helpful to categorize what I perceive as misallocated contention into a dual obstacle.

First is the question of *anachronism*—comrades must decide if an ideological concept is relevant to our times before anything else. While we sometimes believe that in the company of Marxists we would all be acknowledging a certain reverence and legitimacy for the architectural staples, this has time and again proven to not always be the case. From that point, we argue about interpretation and application of that transferable relevant work—how can we decisively render malleable praxis, avoiding the inherent risk of orthodoxy? I hope to address the most conspicuous examples of this misdirection of dialogue.

First, while I'd argue that Bronner's original piece doesn't fully explore Luxemburg's thoughts on coalitions (which are incredibly well developed), he leaps curiously to the Seattle World Trade Organization protests of 1999, three years prior, as an example of an action that "exerted real pressure on the Democratic Party, and momentarily united competing groups in a spirit of internationalism."

Bronner's perspective on Seattle is cringingly rosy, and though I cast no judgment on his inability to soothsay the ultimate futility of the action, I find it difficult to rationalize his assessment of that protest as a successful model three years later. In fact, as I rifle through the various utopian literature not yet yellowed from Occupy Wall Street, I can remember steadfastly preparing myself for its failure, even during its most inspiring heights.

Granted, I tend toward optimism of the will, and pessimism of the, well, everything else, but my lack of faith in Occupy (despite my dedicated participation) and my initial evaluations of what would prove to be its ultimate downfall were actually based heavily on the Seattle uprising's mistakes, not to mention the admissions of former WTO protestors, themselves. So, when Bronner notes Luxemburg's prioritization of class consciousness over organizational development, it appears as such a blatant gaffe to cite an event historically marked with the recurring movement-building pitfalls of weak cohesion and unsustainability. His interest in the actions feels like an attempt to reverse-engineer a moment in history to relate to a particularly conflictual part of Luxemburg's work.

One has to wonder if Bronner still sees the Battle of Seattle as an effective model today, much the way Occupiers have yet to give up the ghost and return to the drawing board in an attempt to, at least, revise their strategies. David Camfield's reply to Bronner touches on this briefly in closing, as he assesses the "post-Seattle" moment as a time to re-confirm bottom-up activism, though he isn't particularly clear on the legacy of the WTO protests, themselves.

Conversely, if Bronner's concept of Seattle is overwhelmingly optimistic in terms of relevance, Alan Johnson's foreboding intimations of Laclau and Mouffe are a sky-is-falling alarmist response. With such gusto and metaphors of Goths and the sack of Rome, he laments the infection of post-Marxism in leftist circles as a cancerous (literally, his words) abandonment of an authentic Marxism. (Were that I could use such florid language without the stigma of feminine hysteria.) I think it's fair to say that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* has not succeeded in eviscerating the relevance of Marxism, no matter how many swings it took—not even the anarchists in my old reading group embraced it as a death knell to the romance of a workers' revolution.

While I commiserate with Johnson's emphasis on legitimating theory (and admire the vigor of his prose, artfully accusatory and stylistically reminiscent to Luxemburg herself), he seems to fall all too squarely into what Raymond Williams warned against as the pitfall of legitimating theory—that it might become "a series of self-alienating options, in which our real political presence is as bystanders, historians or critics of the immense conflicts of other generations and other

places, with only marginal or rhetorical connections to the confused and frustrating politics of our own time and place.”¹

Johnson’s fear of post-Marxism is not only self-alienating, it implies a lack of faith in the resilience of Marxism in the face of detractors and assaults. The boogymen of Laclau and Mouffe are of no more threat to the refinement of a radical Left than Seattle was a boon, and Bronner and Johnson’s respective sermonistic approaches to current political conditions leave behind the crux of what I perceive to be their most compelling point of contention—the balance between party-organizational concerns and the development of working-class consciousness.

While, as Le Blanc points out, Bronner and Johnson seem to mesh on the relationship of revolution and reform, in their move to bring these ideas to some sort of here-and-now application, they both feel tragically late to the dance. Bronner preaches the Seattle WTO Protests as the harbinger of some grand fruition, and invests in grand thought experiments on what Luxemburg’s opinions would be on the new global economy (impossible to know, arguably extraneous). Johnson responds by fretting about the ideological omens of post-Marxist “cancers,” “rubble,” and “fetishes,” which, while a pestering trend in the capricious, insular atmosphere of academic political theory, I’m sure, have yet to fling Marxism into irrelevance.

These respective red herrings, ill attempts at identifying political and ideological developments, render the conversation to two ships passing in the night. Foregoing functional discussion of applicability of Luxemburg’s work, they instead careen onto loose ends of current events or academic trends (sometimes not even that current) for dubious relevance.

* * *

Michael J. Thompson’s piece manages to avoid trendy pitfalls, and engages deeply with the historical context of Luxemburg’s work, but he proves hostile to addressing potential applications or praxis for touchstone organizational concepts—specifically workers’ councils. His aversion to this core concept of Luxemburg’s disregards so much ground by simply adamantly refusing to engage with it. What’s more,

he seems fairly unaware of the political landscape he's working in, other than his own small corner of study.

Starting with workers' councils, he declares them undemocratic and their efficacy limited—as if a limited efficacy renders them completely futile and unworthy of exploration. He doesn't view them as a model to be improved on, developed, or critiqued; he's simply vehemently loath to even discuss them. He asserts this because he believes “the ‘working class’ has itself grown increasingly heterogeneous with respect to its interests as well as to its relation to capital.” While I criticize Bronner's initial speculations of global economies as meandering, Thompson seems to completely ignore the newly globalized economy with his declaration of working-class heterogeneity, and he makes no real attempt to clarify or argue the premise. Such broad strokes leave his response divorced from the very connections the discussions hope to make.

Thompson goes on about workers' councils, but instead of citing concrete dead ends in the model, he instead makes a flying leap to gay marriage, saying, “There is no guarantee that individuals making up any workers' council will, for instance, be inclined to allow homosexuals to marry.”

First, the theoretical inability of a workers' council to eschew heteronormativity in no way diminishes the potential value they have, either in the real world or as a theoretical subject. Workers' councils will not solve peak oil or end racism either, but those are not valid admonishments. Second, even bringing gay marriage into a conversation about democratizing politics and economics, as if the issue is somehow inherently radical, ignores the incredibly problematic nature of institutional marriage in a capitalist society. (In marriage, as it is legally an economic arrangement, the rich share their wealth, and the poor share their poverty.)

This is a subject which has been, and is still being, thoroughly critiqued by socialist feminist and radical queer scholars and activists. Health care, immigration, taxation, housing access, child custody, and welfare—these benefits of marriage are material concerns, and taking workers' councils to task for failing to push for bourgeois marriage completely misses the point. Comrade Thompson's seeming ignorance of this entire aspect of radical politics is troubling, to say the least.

Far more egregious than the Seattle uprising or *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Thompson has somehow managed to completely ignore the ultimate goal of a radically restructured society, one in which I believe it is almost unanimously understood that marriage must be exculpated of its relationship to capital. This is not some libertine cultural preaching for the evisceration of monogamy, but when the inability to enforce an alienating institution of capitalism in our most intimate family spheres is seen as evidence of inefficacy, one has to question how well versed the speaker is in radical politics outside his own.

(It's worth mentioning that I'm somewhat sympathetic to the idea of workers' councils, while still remaining critical, especially in a global economy where industrial factories are emerging in rural areas of the developing world. I focus on them here not because I am particularly passionate about them, but because I see them as an example of something being prematurely harshly dismissed. However, I can find much more compelling criticisms of workers' councils than their imagined lack of support for something as procapitalist in institutional history as marriage.)

Now, I have been married, and I will probably be married again (and then, maybe a few times after that—I like to keep busy), but one need not be one of Thompson's feared "anti-statists" to recognize that the legal (mostly economic) benefits of marriage should be rights, and not privileges, and should not be granted on the basis of state-authorized couplehood. The generally benevolent yet highly liberal crusade for gay marriage is not inherently *damaging* to queer people, but when a radical organization (or political arrangement) is criticized for (conceivably) not pushing for a liberal goal, I am forced to ask what gay marriage will do for homeless queer youth or the HIV-positive. Thompson's reference to gay marriage represents an extremely problematic ignorance of very rudimentary socialist feminism and/or radical queer theory.

Moreover, the very subject matter of the discussion lends itself to a fairly scathing critique of marriage. Given Luxemburg's own romantic history, it seems so little of a stretch to skew a bit vulgar-Marxist when it comes to romantic love and prioritization of the material over something as odd (and hopefully someday anachronistic) as state recognition of romantic love. In light of Luxemburg's legal marriage to

Gustav Lübeck for citizenship, and her simultaneous romance with Leo Jogiches, marriage as a legal entity is ripe for critique in this context—something Luxemburg navigated *in spite of* her feelings, not according to them.

In Luxemburg's love letters (which, given my leisurely literary inclinations over my analytical/theoretical ones, I have read far more diligently than *What Does the Spartacus League Want?*), she says, in regards to her own affairs, "If I feel by intuition that he doesn't love me anymore, I will immediately fly away like a stricken bird." This romantic notion of cut-and-dried divorce flies in the face of institutional state marriage, which simply has no radical potential.

Thompson continues this troublingly rigid defense of state institutions, saying "To advocate workers' councils and see the state as nothing more than a tool of the interests of capital is to simultaneously *emasculate* the very power socialism would have at its disposal to work against the effects and tendencies of capital." (The emphasis is mine.)

I am not an anarchist, but socialists must engage in critiques of the state, and it's absurdly reactionary to maintain that harsh assessments of certain state powers are inherently "anti-statist." To argue that "emasculat[i]on" (an incredibly telling choice of words for a writer who just prior reified marriage as a fundament of queer liberation) is the risk presented by these sorts of arguments implies a threat that is simply not there. This is a sort of stagnant, out-of-touch Marxist castration anxiety I find all too common.

It's important to continually refine and reassert the ideological differences between anticapitalist anarchists and socialists, but Thompson appears to have visualized an anarchist "threat," which I simply don't see. Even when Occupy Wall Street spewed forth an odd sort of (sometimes self-identified) anarcho-Leninist vanguard of its own (often to incredibly effective ends), its potential menace to a socialist movement is minimal—being paranoid over a group more marginal than our own feels a bit absurd in an America with no mass radical movement.

* * *

Thompson's misidentification of radical premises and refusal of engagement is the largest of the problems I seek to address. The

tendency to apply a legacy to current events in the hopes of illuminating the work (Bronner), and the tendency to invoke insular, trollish academic trends as defilers of that legacy (Johnson), actually leave us with very little to apply to our own lives and discussions, but I find these penchants correctable with more consistent engagement with the historical trajectory of movement building. Bronner and Johnson veer, but they don't abandon the original work or dismiss the present.

Truly, I find Bronner's proof-in-the-pudding approach incredibly admirable, and I think there's a reason his essay elicited such a response; canonization is a pitfall of leftist thought, and it takes a commitment to praxis over rigid doctrine (one that apparently labels one a post-Marxist pariah in some cases) to relevantly utilize the work of a great mind like Rosa Luxemburg. His contention that "the political moment must take priority over the economic moment of analysis" has simply rendered him a little vulnerable to the *au courant*.

It is intellectually unfair, of course, to dismiss Bronner as nonanalytical when I have had a greater distance of hindsight, plus a similar moment in Occupy, to declare his evaluation as obviously starry-eyed, but this is simply the nature of discussing a ten-plus-year-old text that attempted to divine the trajectory of a political moment. (I'm quite sure I could do no better, and prefer to safely declare misjudgment after the fact.) Likewise it is unfair to completely ignore Johnson's "post-Marxist" concerns as insular or paranoid—one can never truly predict the trends of thought, and I admire his vigilance against the dilution or perversion of our Marxism.

When we attempt to tackle concrete subject matter, applying theory to our political moment, we have tendencies toward myopia and magnified memories. If one wants anecdotes of leftists doing this outside the academy, ask how many times I've carried a DSA banner and been personally accused of hurling Luxemburg's body into the Landwehr Canal, myself. At the risk of folksiness, in my own evangelical Christian cultural context, the obstacles I identify (relevance and praxis) are neatly summed up in the perpetual political question: What is gospel, and what is merely "church?"

I have the utmost confidence in socialists' ability to navigate these habits and improve our discourse, especially as projects like this one

continue to revisit and reinvigorate long-standing discussions, with comradely good faith.

Note

1. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 238.

CHAPTER 10

Where Do We Go from Here? Rosa Luxemburg and the Crisis of Democratic Capitalism

Chris Maisano

Five years into a global economic crisis that shows no sign of abating, it's become plainly obvious that the uneasy marriage between capitalism and liberal democracy has been effectively annulled. Citizenries throughout the world are outraged by increasing inequality, unemployment, and poverty, but the political elites of the established parties (from nominally center-left or Social Democratic parties as well as the conservatives) have shown little interest in or ability to respond effectively to their wishes. If anything, elites have used the crisis as an opportunity to attack the last vestiges of the welfare state and the labor movement, pushing a politics of austerity that further instantiates its insidious, self-reinforcing logic. From an elite perspective, what state of affairs could possibly be better? Particularly when the Left and the labor movement in almost every nation affected by the crisis have shown themselves completely unable to mount effective opposition to these policies.

As Wolfgang Streeck has argued, democratic capitalism is a highly unstable political-economic formation defined by an internal contradiction between two different principles of resource allocation.¹ On the one hand is the market's desire for unimpeded capital accumulation,

and on the other is the demand for social entitlements and collective goods placed on the state by democratic publics. In normal times, these two tendencies exist in a state of tension, and while the demands of the market tend to outweigh those of the people, democratic publics are still typically able to defend important aspects of previous social, economic, and political victories. This has been true even in the era of neoliberalism, which has eroded but not completely dismantled the welfare states of the advanced capitalist countries. But by the time the current crisis hit in 2007–08, three decades of neoliberalism had significantly fractured the social base of the labor movement and the Left. Instead of providing a new opening for anticapitalist politics, the crisis has (at least thus far) strengthened the hand of those forces intent on restricting the scope of politics and enshrining the market as the unquestioned regulative ideal of public life.

In country after country, we witness the ugly spectacle of the banks and bond markets riding roughshod over the supposedly inviolable principle of popular sovereignty. Over the course of the crisis, whenever democracy has threatened to challenge the market's imperial prerogatives, it is democracy that is consistently preempted. Greece was the canary in the coalmine. In late 2011, then prime minister George Papandreou moved to subject the European Union bailout deal to a popular referendum. For this heresy he was promptly forced out of power and replaced by a technocratic government led by neoliberal economists. At the same time a similar scenario unfolded in Italy, where Silvio Berlusconi's resignation paved the way for the installation of a technocratic government with the economist Mario Monti as prime minister. His program of tax increases, spending cuts, and neoliberal labor market policies enraged Italians but earned the confidence of international investors, who praised him as the man who saved Italy from itself. Monti and his jerry-rigged party were soundly defeated in the February 2013 elections, but when he arrived as Italy's representative at an EU summit meeting weeks later, the assembled dignitaries welcomed him as something of a conquering hero, all but crowning him with a wreath of laurels as a Caesar of neoliberalism.

The story is much the same across Europe and North America. Politicians of all stripes are denounced as liars and thieves, electoral turmoil ejects long-dominant parties from power, populist political

movements spring up at the margins—but the underlying arrangements remain in place much the same as before. In France, François Hollande and the Socialists rode a wave of popular discontent into the Elysée Palace for only the second time in the history of the Fifth Republic. Hollande campaigned on a promise to hike taxes on the rich and attack the power of finance, but his tax plan has failed and his major legislative accomplishment has been the implementation of a neoliberal “competitiveness pact” over the objections of the country’s most militant trade unions. In Italy, Monti has been ejected from power but the broad Left completely abdicated its responsibility to present a coherent alternative to his program. The bellowing comedian Beppe Grillo and his populist Five Star Movement stepped into the breach, claiming the largest share of the votes and preventing the formation of a new government. The Grand Coalition of center-left and center-right parties that ultimately formed a government has presided over a record-high jobless rate of 12.2 percent, with youth unemployment also at an apex of 40.1 percent.² In Germany and the United Kingdom, the Left remains weak, divided, and marginalized, and the return of either the Social Democrats or the Labor Party to government would do little to undo the austerity programs of their conservative counterparts. In Spain, where unemployment has reached obscene levels, the only major challenge to the politics of austerity has expressed itself in the form of a regional separatist movement in wealthy Catalonia, not the articulation of a socialist alternative. In the United States, popular opposition to austerity is widespread but Democrats and Republicans, despite the bloodcurdling rhetoric and ritual performances of extreme partisan polarization, differ mainly over how far and how fast to implement welfare cuts. Recent opinion polls have shown Congress to be less popular than head lice and venereal disease; in some polls, more Americans viewed the idea of the country going Communist more favorably than the current lot of mouth-breathers and bagmen who comprise that august body. Yet the band plays on.

To be sure, the political conjuncture is not uniformly bleak. Oppositional movements that carry the potential to build toward a larger challenge to the system as a whole have sprung up across the advanced capitalist countries. In Europe, we’ve seen SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left—Unitary Social Front) move from

the margins to the center of Greek politics as the postdictatorship party system continues to disintegrate; the emergence of the Front de Gauche in France, where Jean-Luc Mélenchon mounted a spirited challenge to austerity politics in last year's presidential campaign; the surprising popular appeal of the Socialist Party in the Netherlands, which polled strongly in the lead-up to recent parliamentary elections; and the enthusiastic response in the United Kingdom to a call for a new leftist party to challenge not just the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government but the moribund Labor Party as well. These electoral efforts have drawn strength from extraparliamentary movements demanding not just an end to austerity but an entirely different way of doing politics, exemplified by the "movement of the squares" in Greece and the Spanish *indignados*. In the United States, the crisis has not been so acute as to provoke ruptures or realignments within the electoral system, but street-level resistance to austerity has been widespread. The mass uprising in Wisconsin against Governor Scott Walker's attacks on labor rights was the dress rehearsal for Occupy Wall Street, which spread like wildfire from lower Manhattan to cities and towns around the country in late 2011 and 2012. These upsurges have even imbued certain sections of the US labor movement with a fighting spirit that's found expression in national campaigns like OUR Walmart and recent strikes by fast-food workers in New York City.

To date, these movements have tended to reject parties, representation, and the state *in toto*. The *indignados*, Occupiers, and others have instead sought to instantiate direct forms of popular deliberation and action that operate completely outside existing structures and seek to prefigure the new society in their internal organizational practices. This should not be surprising. People today have very little control over anything that happens in their lives. They feel like playthings of powerful forces that are not subject to even a modicum of democratic accountability or control. This is what accounts for the relentless focus of movements like Occupy on process and consensus. In these spaces, where every issue or problem is hashed out to everyone's satisfaction—or at least to the point where everyone will come to accept what has been proposed—people gain a sense of agency. This is why Occupy and its analogues have assiduously avoided establishing specific programs or demands, because doing so necessarily

assumes engagement with the state and other institutions that make people feel like they have no power.

In their total rejection of the current mode of doing politics, the partisans of “horizontalism” see clearly, but with only one eye. These recent years have witnessed a remarkable degree of social ferment, but these disparate protests have yet to translate into a long-term project capable of harnessing power and building political capacities for sustainable challenge to the rule of capital. The current ebbing of Occupy’s fortunes, while disheartening, presents us with a crucial opportunity to engage in critical reflection and analysis of where we have been and where we might go from here.

* * *

Strangely enough, an esoteric debate over a long-dead Polish revolutionary that unfolded in the pages of *New Politics* over a decade ago seems like a fairly good place to start. In his 2001 essay “Red Dreams and the New Millennium: Notes on the Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg,” Stephen Eric Bronner employs his particular interpretation of Luxemburg’s theory and practice as a heuristic device to approach the major issues of the day: globalization and its discontents, climate change, and the acrimonious intra-left debate over the question of “humanitarian intervention.” This short piece inspired a torrent of responses from a number of figures on the intellectual Left, and while much of the debate concerned itself with exegetical questions over the appropriate understanding of Luxemburg’s thought (and the intellectual legacy of Marxism generally), it anticipated a number of contemporary controversies over which strategies, tactics, and modes of organization the radical Left should employ to confront the crisis of democratic capitalism.

The debate covered a wide range of issues in the field of Marxist thought. For my purposes here, however, I’m particularly interested in arguments over the state, the efficacy of workers’ councils, and the problems of representation and leadership in revolutionary movements. Broadly speaking, we encounter two conflicting approaches to these issues, with Bronner and Michael Thompson arguing for an approach that appreciates the potentially liberatory qualities of the republican state and gradualist programs of radical reform, and Alan

Johnson, David Camfield, Paul Le Blanc, and Barry Finger defending a revolutionary councilist tradition that seeks to overthrow the republican state and replace it with a network of direct organs of popular power.

On my reading, Bronner and Thompson clearly got the better of the debate. As Bronner argues, historical experiments with alternative forms of organization tend to indicate that workers' councils cannot either "deal with a complex economy or guarantee civil liberties," and that the administrative and coercive powers of some sort of state will be required to radically transform the basic structures of the political economy. It's incredibly difficult to imagine a network of workers' councils with the capacity to direct the conversion to a green economy or take the financial system into public ownership, both of which would require not just the repression of those who would fight such measures but the application of technical expertise on a fairly massive scale. And as Thompson points out (following the critique by the Austro-Marxists), workers' councils were "insufficient to produce a fully realized political democracy since they were composed of only one strata of society." While capitalist states are certainly guilty of privileging the economic interests of the capitalist class over the common good, it's not inevitable that states *per se* must fall victim to this trap. Instead, socialists should work to privilege the political over the economic and to fight for a republican state based on "the promotion of the general interest at the expense of particular interest."

I share the Bronner-Thompson conception of socialism as a living, breathing movement that seeks to bring the future into the present through what Ralph Miliband and Marcel Liebman called "revolutionary reformism."³ But I agree with Bronner's critics that he goes too far to argue that "the institutional goal of the revolution initially sought by Luxemburg, in short, has been realized." The virtues of the liberal republican state, such as they are, are hollowed out and vitiated by the brutal realities of capitalist class power. The crisis of representation in ostensibly democratic and republican states demonstrates this conclusively. The historical project of democracy still remains to be completed within the framework of the republican state. We need a different kind of state, a *really* democratic republic.

Bronner concedes the point when he reminds himself that he had previously called for the establishment of "'secondary' or 'associative'

organizations that might provide a more direct form of democracy” within the overall framework of a radically democratized republican state. This is where the seemingly esoteric argument over councils and republics becomes relevant to socialists and radicals in the age of Occupy, where organizational questions of “horizontalism” and “verticalism” have come to the fore. It’s also one of the places where Luxemburg’s theoretical and practical legacy proves to be highly valuable to contemporary activists. Contrary to misconceptions propagated by Hannah Arendt and others, Luxemburg was not a one-sided advocate of spontaneity and direct action against organization and party. She spent most of her life engaged in the struggle to build a revolutionary party and fully accepted the need for political representation, leadership, and discipline. In her writing and her organizational work, she strove to integrate those two perspectives—not entirely successfully, but the attempt is an important part of her legacy. It’s a useful vantage point from which to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Occupy and to formulate political strategies that might point a way out of the crisis of democratic capitalism.

* * *

The media was quick to anoint David Graeber as Occupy’s leading theoretician, but I would argue that that honor rightfully belongs to Marina Sitrin. For years, she has articulated the theory and practice of “horizontalism” that permeated Occupy’s various encampments. After the breakup of the Zuccotti Park encampment, Sitrin participated in a symposium on the state of the contemporary US Left in the pages of *Dissent*. In a critique of Michael Kazin’s plea for the new radicals to articulate a clear vision of a new society and a program for how we might obtain it, Sitrin offers a concise statement of the horizontalist rejection of demands, representation, program, and the party form.⁴

I was willing to give this perspective a hearing during Occupy’s early days, particularly because it seemed as if its adherents had succeeded where those of us on the socialist Left had failed, and miserably at that. Almost two years later, however, it seems curiously out of touch. Sitrin’s vindication of horizontalism neatly captures a number of weaknesses in its basic orientation that hindered the transformation

of Occupy into a political force capable of winning power for the 99%. Here I want to focus on three of them: the false dichotomy between direct and representative democracy; the false opposition of “bad” state versus “good” society; and the confusion of organization and leadership with domination.

Democracy Is Direct and Representative

The fact that Occupy spoke first and foremost to the crisis of representation is probably the main reason why its message resonated beyond the ranks of the perennial activists. All of the institutions of contemporary society systematically deny those subject to them a chance to articulate their interests, needs, or concerns. The fact that the various encampments offered people a space in which to just speak their minds, interminably if they wanted to, satisfied a widespread need to be heard in public in a direct, unmediated fashion. This was one of the most positive and liberating aspects of the encampments, and Occupy suffered dramatically from their loss.

Where Sitrin and the horizontalists generally go astray is their construction of a false dichotomy between representative and direct forms of democracy, as if they were mutually exclusive and couldn't possibly coexist within a single institutional space. In the many conversations I had in Zuccotti Park and elsewhere, I found that the concept had become an article of faith that prevented Occupy from addressing the myriad weaknesses of its process. There was very little discussion of the ways in which it frustrated the process of collective will formation, particularly when the aspirations of a segment of the occupation ran afoul of the tightly knit cadre group running things behind the scenes. Any suggestion that the occupation might consider adopting certain structures of representation or delegation opened one to denunciation and charges of bad faith.

There's no logical or practical reason why organs of direct democracy can't be inscribed within a larger institutional configuration that allows for representation and delegation at broader geographical levels or in policy areas that require a certain degree of technical expertise. This has been a perennial aspiration of revolutionary movements in the modern era, which have typically sought to replace the capitalist state with a commune of communes. This is the sort of

approach that seeks the establishment of what Staughton Lynd, in his unjustly neglected book *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism*, calls “bicameralism from below.” Such a configuration would be defined by a relationship of constructive tension in which representative structures are continually checked by autonomous organs of direct popular participation and control.⁵ This strikes me as the only reasonable approach to thinking about charting a way out of the crisis of representation and building new and truly democratic political institutions.

Bad State/Good Society

The state has always been an object of fear and vilification in the American political imagination, and the US Left has never really occupied a space outside of this ideological consensus. Opposed to the pernicious state is civil society, a virtuous realm of free association untainted by the machinations of power or interest. So it’s no surprise that the horizontalist vision as articulated by Sitrin and others has resonated so strongly in the contemporary US radical milieu. In many ways, it represents a recrudescence of some of the most problematic aspects of the global justice movement, whose “activism” was grounded in a moral discourse that cast the state in one-dimensional (i.e., repressive and authoritarian) terms.⁶

Sitrin sounds the refrain that has become so familiar in recent years:

The point of reference of the movements is not the state or politics conventionally defined. There is no desire to take over the state or to create a new party . . . democracy is the crux of Occupy politics, and democracy practiced in such a way so as to upend vertical political relationships and expand horizontal ones . . . The question for the future is not how to create a plan for what a better country will look like, but how to deepen and broaden the assemblies taking place and how to enhance participatory democracy in the process.⁷

The horizontalist rejection of the state *in its current form* is an impulse that I share. But in completely rejecting engagement with state power,

horizontalists fail to grasp that *another kind of state is possible*, one that allows for a significant amount of space for popular participation in policy making and public administration. Recall the argument made by Marx in his “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” in which he reminded his erstwhile comrades in the German socialist movement that “freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it.”⁸ Not only is such a socialization of the state possible, it’s necessary. If we are to adequately confront our overlapping social and ecological crises, the task will no doubt require a significant mobilization of state power to reshape production, investment, and social relations both nationally and globally. Simply put, by rejecting the state *in toto*, we leave the most powerful institution in our society uncontested, leaving it safely in the hands of the 1%.

Arendt or Luxemburg?

One of the chief ironies of Occupy’s encampment phase was that its effectiveness was often attributed to its putative horizontalism. In reality, this demonstrated the absolute need for a living movement to have some sort of *centralized, institutional* space to tie together its disparate currents and tendencies. The encampments gave the movement an address and made it relatively easy for new recruits to rally to the cause and maintain their attachments once they had done so.

In many ways, the encampments were a substitute for a prefiguration of the *new kind of party* we want to build: a broad formation that allows for radicals of different persuasions to come together in a pluralistic and egalitarian institutional space. The encampments pointed the way toward a new kind of organizational model that might allow us to meld the horizontal with the vertical, to create an institutional space that encourages the creation of a pluralistic and egalitarian internal culture with a greater sense of common purpose and action. The problem with the encampments was that they were strictly identified with specific patches of ground. Once the police decided they had seen enough, those spaces were broken up and the processes they engendered had no way to sustain themselves.

On the vexed question of organization and leadership, the present moment leaves us with a choice: Will we be the followers of Hannah

Arendt or Rosa Luxemburg? Although many people in and around Occupy characterized it as the latest instantiation of the anarchist impulse, Arendt was the unacknowledged presiding spirit of Zuccotti Park. The argument she advances in her classic work *On Revolution* will sound familiar to anyone who was involved with Occupy. According to Arendt, modern politics has become an instrumentalist project devoted primarily to protecting the power and privileges of interest groups and state bureaucrats. It closes off nearly all avenues for popular participation and substitutes the expertise of elite technicians and party politicians for the direct action of the people. Arendt also denounces the centrality of the “social question” in modern politics, because the intense conflicts that inevitably follow from it threatens her idealized, autonomous political space that she wished to keep untainted by considerations of social or economic interests. But in evacuating the social question from the political sphere, Arendt drains politics of much of its substance and turns it into little more than a forum for speech making and other modes of public performance, a kind of public theater where one’s virtue is judged by others who are similarly free from the need to go to work or do much of anything else. Inevitably, political life becomes the province of a self-selected hard core of actors, to the exclusion of those who can’t devote all their time to politics.⁹

The similarities to the dynamic that prevailed in Zuccotti Park and elsewhere should be immediately apparent. Arendt’s embrace of the popular organs of the revolutionary tradition, from the various “societies” that sprung up during the radical phase of the French Revolution, to Thomas Jefferson’s republic of wards, to the Paris Commune, the Russian soviets, and the German *räte*, is certainly admirable. But like the horizontalists of today, she makes a too-strict dichotomy between these organizational forms and structures of leadership and representation, particularly the party.

Ironically, Arendt holds up Rosa Luxemburg as a leading avatar of her preferred revolutionary tradition. This move is ironic because Luxemburg, perhaps more than any other figure in the history of the Left, understood the necessity of combining the horizontal and the vertical, spontaneity and organization, mass movement and party.

Luxemburg is often mistakenly cast as an unalloyed devotee of spontaneity, direct action, and insurrection. It’s certainly true that she

often spoke eloquently of the power of direct, unmediated expressions of popular power, and this tendency constitutes an important aspect of her political thought. But a close reading of her work, particularly her classic pamphlet “The Mass Strike,” shows that Luxemburg sought to encourage the construction of a more complex dynamic in the internal organization of a revolutionary movement. For Luxemburg, spontaneity, direct action, and mass participation are effective insofar as they further the project of building durable forms of political organization capable of exercising leadership over the movement as a whole.¹⁰

Horizontalism and verticalism, spontaneity and organization, egalitarianism and leadership were not mutually exclusive categories for Luxemburg. Properly understood, these dynamics should be put into mutually constitutive relationships that could guide the development of a movement capable of challenging the combined forces of the bourgeois state and capital. As Luxemburg observed, the chaotic, spontaneous mass strikes that broke out across Russia during the years leading up to the revolution of 1905 were “the starting point of a feverish *work of organization*... from the whirlwind and the storm, out of the fire and glow of the mass strike and the street fighting rise again, like Venus from the foam, fresh, young, powerful, buoyant trade unions.”¹¹

Most of these strikes began as localized and rather limited struggles over wages and working conditions, but they developed (in conjunction with the agitational work of socialist parties) into general confrontations with the ruling class. The parallels with the most successful movements in Europe and North America since the onset of the crisis—the rise of SYRIZA in Greece and the Québec student strike against higher education tuition hikes—are clear. By raising a set of seemingly limited and “reformist” demands that seek to address the dire situation confronting their country, SYRIZA has managed to attract growing numbers of Greek workers to their party and put them on the verge of forming a government in the next election. CLASSE (the coalition of student unions that spearheaded the struggle in Québec) began its campaign by raising relatively limited demands around the question of education, but as it escalated its tactics, it managed to fashion a fully fledged social movement involving many other sectors of the population, particularly in Montréal.

Both SYRIZA and CLASSE appear to have built unusually democratic and pluralistic institutional cultures, which has played no small part in allowing them to establish legitimacy as the leading organizations in their respective movements. SYRIZA is a coalition of radical left political formations from a diverse array of traditions ranging from Eurocommunism to Maoism to Trotskyism to radical ecology. The party makes its decisions on the basis of consensus, allowing member parties to maintain a degree of autonomy while facilitating unity in action. It has grounded itself in social struggles while also engaging in electoral activity, making it practically the only Greek political formation that has any legitimacy in the eyes of the popular movements.¹²

In Québec, CLASSE was a loose coalition of student organizations with varying political orientations and traditions of militancy. Initiated by ASSÉ, traditionally the most militant student union in the province, CLASSE engaged in a painstaking project of education, agitation, and outreach weeks and months leading up to the strike. This work allowed CLASSE to pursue a militant strategy while maintaining the continued adherence of more moderate organizations and individuals to the broader movement. The student movement also adopted the general assembly as its basic unit of decision making, but unlike Occupy's chaotic and often impotent assemblies, theirs were structured to allow for both mass participation and decisiveness in action. Québec student leader Jérémie Bédard-Wien describes how the strike's assemblies worked:

It's about getting people into the same space, and that space is nothing like Occupy Wall Street general assemblies. It's extremely formalized. Every member of the union has the right to vote, to propose motions, and to speak during those general assemblies, but that's it. Non-members do not even have the right to speak. There is a chair, there is a note-taker, it's all regulated by a very formal code of procedures and the association's bylaws. It's very hard to chair one of these meetings, you need to know the rules very well. You have to keep order, and so on. And votes are taken for the most part by majority. The strike was taken by majority, there was no consensus. Consensus is not really democratic—it allows a small group of people to block the process for hours on end if they want to, and you cannot vote a strike by consensus, obviously.¹³

While Occupy has hitherto chosen to follow in the footsteps of Arendt, SYRIZA and CLASSE have followed the example of Luxemburg. Even accounting for the vast differences in political institutions and political culture between Greece, Québec, and the United States, the relative effectiveness of each approach seems immediately apparent. SYRIZA and Québec students are moving forward while US radicals are stuck trying to figure out why Occupy stalled, or explaining how the energies unleashed in the course of the Wisconsin uprising gave way to defeat, demobilization, and despair.

* * *

It was always strange to me that Occupy adopted the name that it did. I can't think of many other social movements in history that named themselves after their signature tactic rather than their social base or their vision for a new society. The call for a "general strike" on May 1, 2012, unconnected to any particular social struggle or political campaign, brought to mind Luxemburg's perplexity at the tendency of certain militants to put tactics above strategy, process above program. As she wrote in "The Mass Strike,"

It is just as impossible to "propagate" the mass strike as an abstract means of struggle as it is to propagate the "revolution." "Revolution" like "mass strike" signifies nothing but an external form of the class struggle, which can have sense and meaning only in connection with definite political situations... If anyone were to undertake to make the mass strike generally, as a form of proletarian action, the object of methodological agitation, and to go house to house canvassing with this "idea" in order to gradually win the working class to it, it would be as idle and profitless and absurd an occupation as it would be to seek to make the idea of the revolution or of the fight at the barricades the object of a special agitation.¹⁴

Occupy was correct in rejecting the one-off symbolic action and adopting an ongoing, open-ended struggle as its basic tactic. But because this tactic wasn't part of a larger strategy grounded in a specific social struggle with clear demands, the loss of the encampments meant the end of the activity. Occupy's "if you build it, they will

come” approach to political activity succeeded brilliantly in jump-starting a movement where everyone else had failed, but it wasn’t able to sustain itself over the course of even a few months.

I close by turning once again to Luxemburg, whose keen grasp of the dynamics of popular movements is deeply relevant to our time. “Occupy” does not (or should not) signify a specific encampment or even a specific tactic to be used in the course of mass struggle. As Luxemburg observed, “It is absurd to think of the mass strike as one act, one isolated action. The mass strike is rather the indication, the rallying idea, of a whole period of the class struggle lasting for years, perhaps for decades.”¹⁵

Change the phrase “mass strike” to “occupation,” and it becomes difficult to determine whether these words were written in 1906 or 2013. The interlocking political, economic, and social dynamics that summoned the occupations into existence and fueled the movement’s grievances will not, and cannot, be solved within the parameters of the present state of affairs. The cause of the 99% is the rallying point for a generation, a movement worthy of our commitment, our struggle, and even our joy. Our problems aren’t going away anytime soon. What’s needed now is a refoundation of the Occupy movement in the light of our weaknesses and the lessons taught by those who came before us. The rich intellectual and practical legacy of Rosa Luxemburg is an excellent place from which to begin again.

Notes

1. Wolfgang Streeck, “The Crises of Democratic Capitalism,” *New Left Review* Vol. 71 (Sept.-Oct. 2011), pp. 5–29.
2. “Italy’s PM faces confidence vote,” *Al Jazeera English*, October 2, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2013/10/italy-pm-faces-confidence-vote-201310273549447697-.html> (accessed October 2, 2013).
3. Ralph Miliband and Marcel Liebman, “Beyond Social Democracy,” in *Socialist Register 1985/86*, ed. Ralph Miliband et. al. (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 1985), pp. 476–89.
4. See Marina Sitrin, “Horizontalism and the Occupy Movements,” *Dissent*, <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/horizontalism-and-the-occupy-movements> (accessed April 7, 2013). Michael Kazin, “The Fall and Rise of the U.S. Populist Left,” *Dissent*, <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-fall-and-rise-of-the-u-s-populist-left> (accessed April 7, 2013).

5. Staughton Lynd, *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1968), p. 171.
6. Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti, "Action Will Be Taken: Left Anti-Intellectualism and Its Discontents," *Left Business Observer*, <http://www.leftbusinessobserver.com/Action.html> (accessed April 8, 2013).
7. Sitrin, "Horizontalism and the Occupy Movements."
8. Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch04.htm> (accessed April 8, 2013).
9. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2006). My reading of Arendt's politics is heavily indebted to the critique advanced by Joseph Schwartz. See Joseph M. Schwartz, *The Permanence of the Political: A Democratic Critique of the Radical Impulse to Transcend Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 189–216.
10. "If, however, the direction of the mass strike in the sense of command over its origin, and in the sense of the calculating and reckoning of the cost, is a matter of the revolutionary period itself, the directing of the mass strike becomes, in an altogether different sense, the duty of social democracy and its leading organs. Instead of puzzling their heads with the technical side, with the mechanism, of the mass strike, the social democrats are called upon to assume political leadership in the midst of the revolutionary period." Rosa Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike," in *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg: Reform or Revolution and The Mass Strike*, ed. Helen Scott (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2007), p. 149.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 134–35.
12. Antonis Davanellos, "Where Did SYRIZA Come From?" *Socialist Worker*, May 17, 2012, <http://socialistworker.org/2012/05/17/where-did-syriza-come-from> (accessed April 7, 2013).
13. Matt Porter and Maria Svart, "Québec Students Strike for Free Higher Education: An Interview with Jérémie Bédard-Wien," *Democratic Left*, March 4, 2013, http://www.dsausa.org/quebec_students_strike (accessed April 7, 2013).
14. Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike," p. 118.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

CHAPTER 11

Contra Bronner on Luxemburg and Working-Class Revolution

Michael Hirsch

My introduction to Rosa Luxemburg was familial. Ready for a late soiree, I wore what was then late-teen de rigueur: a sweatshirt, pea jacket, jeans, and boots. My father, a German Social Democrat in his youth—more for the party’s wrap-around social and cultural services than its particular ideology—asked me if I was going out to meet Rosa Luxemburg. I didn’t know who that was, but she sounded good.

She still sounds good.

Dad was an 11-year-old living in Germany when the murdered Luxemburg’s corpse was fished out of Berlin’s Landwehr canal. He was a 26-year-old exile when her remains were removed by the Nazis from the Friedrichsfelde Cemetery. Too young in 1919 for him to actually know much about the living Luxemburg or the comrades of the German Revolution, it was Karl Liebknecht’s name and hers that meant something honorable to his family and the millions like them living in Berlin’s working-class districts, where support for socialists of all factions was as common as breath.

Actress Barbara Sukowa, who played Luxemburg in the eponymous 1986 film, said of her that “Rosa was different from the characters I usually play—probably the only woman I’ve played who is not

neurotic.” Director Margarethe von Trotta called her “the first victim of National Socialism,”¹ an apt observation.

Luxemburg, like Lenin, was an active revolutionary, attuned to the flow of actual contemporary movements. Marx and Engels by contrast were relatively shielded from the sensuous activities of real social forces. The *Communist Manifesto* was written even before the continent-wide eruptions of 1848; only Engels lived to see the end of a decades-long recession, the first giant steps of Britain’s industrial unions, and the explosion of support for socialism in Germany and elsewhere, if not yet the imperial battles over colonies that led to the First World War.

As Perry Anderson notes, neither Marx nor Engels “had bequeathed any comparable corpus [to their work in political economy] of concepts for the political strategy and tactics of the proletarian revolution.”² That was Lenin’s genius. So even if Engels could write in the 1890 forward to the *Manifesto*, quoting a leading trade union leader that “Continental Socialism has lost its terrors for us”³ and with continental socialism recognizably Marxist in word if not always in deed, it was also narrowly and not effectively political in the sense of connecting economic struggles to actual or potential offensives against the state. Its ample social and cultural services were not a substitute for agitation.

Luxemburg’s strengths lay in viewing history as an interactive process, not a dislocated series of events. She understood, long before Edward Thompson, that social classes were relationships and not categories or things. Luxemburg, with her long view that working people had to be prepared—not just persuaded or anxious—to rule, is an enigma for those conditioned to think revolutions are made by clusters of dedicated operatives, rather than as an expression of a class in formation evolving in experience, consciousness, collective action, and social conditions.

Lenin is problematic if only read as the apostle of cadre efficiency and professional revolutionaries indispensable in building a New Jerusalem. While Lenin wrote in *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* that “the masses must have their own political experience,”⁴ that’s not the Lenin—fairly or unfairly—who was handed down to posterity. Yet Luxemburg’s attraction to those of my New Left generation wasn’t just as an elective affinity for an intellectually vibrant,

singular, doomed individual; it was also in who she wasn't. She wasn't the much abused Lenin, whom we accepted as the arch conspirator, hypercentralist, veteran character assassin, ground-preparer for Stalin, and a political strategist rarely appreciated by any but moist-eyed sect acolytes. Lenin was a "hard" who would avoid musical concerts because it made him "soft," while Luxemburg, as her letters make clear, was a fully formed person who could smell the bread laborers baked and the roses grown at leisure. It was Luxemburg's declaration at the founding of the German Communist Party that "activity itself educates the masses" that was a cardinal New Left principle.

As bodies grew older, passions cooler, and reading wider, we came to know these takes were overly simple if not grossly unfair. While each had historic differences that shouldn't be minimized—the charge that Lenin was at bottom more Jacobin than Marxist has some truth, as does Luxemburg's short-shrifting politics as public policy—both encapsulated the truism voiced by Anatole France soon after Luxemburg's death, that in war "one thinks he is dying for his country, but he dies for the industrialists." That's something the Majority Socialists denied as they invented reasons why German collapse on the battlefield was bad for German workers and why class war had to be suspended during wartime for the sake of a sacred union with the old German order.

What Endures in Luxemburg's Heritage?

The name "Rosa Luxemburg" today is known best by the general German public for Berlin's Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, whose eponymous subway stop in central Berlin caters to theatergoers, shoppers, and visitors to Left Party headquarters. In the mainstream press, when mentioned at all, she's either reviled or condescended to. Typical was the mind-numbing headline to an otherwise friendly review by Sheila Rowbotham in the *Guardian* of a recently published collection of Luxemburg's letters, describing her in the teaser subhead as "an outspoken critic of Marxism"⁵—something she assuredly was not.

What's to be appreciated of Red Rosa today is her steadfast opposition to reform as a final goal (as opposed to seeing battles for reforms as indispensable tactics, which she did). Her critique of capitalist democracy and her deep respect for the ability of working people to

engage in and win class struggles is as much relevant in the age of neoliberalism as it was in the period of national cartels and imperial rivalries. Her conception of socialism was a regime of liberty. In “The Russian Revolution” she wrote:

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.⁶

For Luxemburg and her comrade Karl Liebknecht, opposition to the First World War was not made on pacifist grounds or even prompted by the need to attack the Majority Socialists for abandoning commonly-agreed-to internationalist principles. It was because support for the war—including conscripted labor, a ban on strikes, fingering militants to the authorities, and a military dictatorship imposing a state of siege—was an unholy peace treaty with the enemy at home, one that strengthened capital. That policy could only result—should Germany win the war—in a stronger reactionary social order and a weakened working class.

In *What Does the Spartacus League Want?* written within a month before her death, Luxemburg set out her analysis:

The victory of the Spartakusbund stands not at the beginning but at the end of the revolution. It is identical with the victory of the millions of masses of the socialist proletariat. . . . The proletarian revolution requires no terror for its aims; it hates and despises killing. It does not need these weapons because it does not combat individuals but institutions, because it does not enter the arena with naïve illusions whose disappointment it would seek to revenge. It is not the desperate attempt of a minority to mold the world forcibly according to its ideal, but the action of the great massive millions of the people, destined to fulfill a historic mission and to transform historical necessity into reality.⁷

The use of “historical mission” can be misleading. There is nothing preordained in the notion that workers, in the words of the

Manifesto, “have a world to win.” Or to lose. Goals don’t need to be met to be goals; they only need to be necessary and achievable within reason. Luxemburg’s counterpoising “socialism” and “barbarism” as humanity’s only real choices was a departure from the orthodox Marxism of Karl Kautsky and the leadership of the German Social Democracy, who insisted that a scientifically grounded historical materialism showed the classless society to be inevitable. What was inevitable for Luxemburg was not the victory of an oppressed class but economic crisis and the ensuing opportunities for that class. What workers did, given economic and political collapse, was in their own hands.

Bronner’s Luxemburg, and Hers

Steve Bronner deserves credit for his painstaking work in renewing Luxemburg’s heritage. As a scholar, biographer, master educator, and activist, he’s owed a debt. As early as 1980, in an essay penned in memory of the martyred student leader Rudi Dutschke, Bronner wrote with brio and intelligence about the socialist project and its failures on both sides of the Iron Curtain.⁸ But at various points in the debate in *New Politics* over Luxemburg’s legacy, he writes what reads like an implication that reforms in and of themselves—not just as agitational targets and marks of success—can alter the structure of capital and mollify its potential gravediggers such that revolution and the destruction of a hegemonic owning class is a fool’s errand. Well, we should all be such fools.

Bronner is right to label the “inevitable triumph of socialism” trope (or for that matter post–Cold War end-of-history theorizing that capitalism itself is permanent) a teleology, a method that *a priori* situates fixed ends as part of an overall design. Humans, as Marx said, “make their own history, but not as they choose; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.” So “the tradition of all the dead generations” may indeed “weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living,”⁹ but humans have the capacity to awaken from the worst nightmares. Luxemburg’s notion was that humanity’s real choices are just two: socialism or barbarism. That formulation, borrowed and amplified from Engels, is *not* teleological.

It is simply the logical outcome of an ongoing struggle that will leave society either better or massively worse. Whatever the outcome, capitalist stability cannot survive.

Now Bronner may say, as he does to David Camfield, that a belief in revolution and the working class as capitalism's gravedigger, absent objective justifications, is a wish if not a religious tenet because it can't be proven *a posteriori*. Fair enough! Marxism is not a divining rod or an Ouija board. Projecting possible futures is what makes for horseracing, not science. Still, I'll bet on the prole horses. And why not? Pascal's wager on the existence of a god is based on a cost-benefit analysis. Why not the same wager by capitalism's critics?

But where I think Bronner strays is in downplaying the implications of the information we do have, that capital installs a social order featuring growing concentrations of wealth and power by a few, fueled by escalating exploitation in a rote drive for accumulation. (Just one effect: decreased social mobility. In a study of 17 Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development countries, the United States came in a poor thirteenth, considerably behind Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Canada and just outpacing the United Kingdom and Italy.¹⁰)

The implication for me: such a social order is not merely heinous but explosive. When the top 10 percent of US households in 2010 received 44.5 percent of all income and 76 percent of all wealth, the capacity for the lower 90 percent to affect government policy is compromised, if not crippled.¹¹ Those numbers suggest a plutocracy in the making in the United States, and a likely unstable one. As the rise of Hitler showed, barbarism is a ready candidate to replace bourgeois democracy when an established order fails. Does this necessarily imply that the world proletariat can act with the degree of cohesion and interest to make a revolution? No, but it certainly puts into question the viability of centuries of piecemeal reform or even a permanent stalemate between the classes.

And does Bronner really believe—as he suggests—that the proletariat is disaggregating? That it is so atomized that it resembles what Marx said about the nineteenth-century peasantry, that they were a sack of potatoes held together only by the sack? If anything, global capital is recasting the working class as a world class, one that is “in

itself” if not (or not yet) “for itself.” Making the proletariat into a class for itself and not just voters for the common good or masses to be manipulated was precisely Luxemburg’s goal.

Then there’s the hobgoblin of critical mass. Will enough people want socialism? Will enough working people act as one to move revolution from fantasy to fact? Posing the matter this way only restates the problem; it doesn’t deal with it. From the standpoint of class struggle, socialism is not an ethical ideal or a consumer choice; it’s a necessity for survival as a culture and as a species.

Consider today’s alternatives: the Koch Brothers are only the most visible of those corporate heads targeting our quintessentially moderate unions for extinction. Wal-Mart is a world-beater because it severely underpays its employees, causing other retailers to compete in a race to the bottom. The US auto industry survives only at the expense of a drastically reduced workforce forced to accept heavy pay cuts and drastically reduced pension and health benefits. Industrial jobs are returning to the United States precisely because workers in nonunion states are job-desperate and will work cheap.

What would the employer class do if a genuinely progressive administration was elected or unions uniformly adopted social and economic justice agendas that of necessity challenged the corporate bottom line? Would shareholder buccaneer David Einhorn cease his parasitic ways? Would a twenty-first century incarnation of Carl Icahn operate a business as a public service rather than something to dismantle and sell by the piece?

What is properly utopian isn’t the belief in the need for revolution but the insistence that a class society, one built on manic accumulation and exploitation of labor power on a world scale, can survive indefinitely.

In the comfort of relative affluence, all of us fine-tune Marxism until its every kink is ironed out and every prediction reexamined until only “method” remains. Or at least it remains as something Marxists can agree on. That’s fair game. Even the ruthless criticism of all things deserves critique. It’s what retrospection, the availability of and access to documents, collegial input, and the lack of historical urgency and the mixed blessings of polemical exchange allow. After 1914, Luxemburg had no such luxuries.

So if thinking the exploited are capable of overturning the capitalist order, forestalling barbarism, and installing an egalitarian ethos is unscientific, and in effect part of the sacred, then saying that they cannot is profane. Marx referred to socialism as the end of prehistory, not the end of strife or a return to innocence in the Garden of Eden.

I suspect Bronner agrees that capitalism cannot be reformed to eliminate exploitation or resolve class conflict equitably, or even that a regime of modest (let alone radical) reforms under capitalism is likely. Bronner seems to think that the reforms he espouses would, even if instituted, serve as the proverbial bird in the hand to check any revolutionary class-in-formation. To me, it's an empty hand. By the most optimistic measure, a progressive government committed to making inroads into the wealth and security of the richest families and the largest corporations, even if only to redistribute income, would be undone. Its fall could be nonviolent, as was the exit of the first British Labor government through a scandal manufactured by the permanent staffs of the security services; or it could involve homicide and mass murder, the weapons that exploded the Sukarno and Allende regimes and massacred their supporters in Indonesia and Chile.

Another fault: Bronner, in response to Camfield, argues (albeit only in a footnote) that the German Social Democratic leadership was "constrained" in supporting the war and in acting as an agent for big capital and the military. "One false step by the socialist leadership might have meant ruining the work of a generation," Bronner wrote in 1992,¹² which is exactly what happened anyway, and within 14 years of the first Ebert government. As I will argue, the party had ample choices besides being capital's cat's-paw. Perhaps the apparatus of the party and the unions would not take the risk, but German workers had options. Luxemburg showed that they did.

Bronner also fondly quotes his mentor Henry Pachter, "One cannot have socialism. One is a socialist." If that means that socialism has no use-by date, Pachter is right. If it means that there are no answers to the key "social" questions of eradicating hunger and scarcity, he is wrong. As Isaac Deutscher put it, even under socialism there will be problems, including psychological pathologies. All that can be reasonably assumed is that "socialist man will be a better patient."¹³

I do not take on Bronner easily. He is a hefty Luxemburg scholar, and someone such as I who doesn't read German opining on the

German Revolution—when key texts are not in translation, let alone government documents and economic studies from the period that could shed more light on what was possible for the emerging revolutionary movement of 1918—may be punching above his weight. But then this exchange hinges on Bronner's beef with revolutionary romanticism and an idealized councilist polity. Certainly there's a lot to beef about. Supporters' failure to articulate a theory of national let alone international government based on the explosive yet fragile workers' and soldiers' councils is a weakness. It's also a question Luxemburg did not live to answer. Yet in his own way Bronner is ahistorical. Not only does he seem optimistic about spreading democracy in a class-divided society, especially now—when austerity policies and neoliberal regimes in the advanced capitalist nations are imbedding plutocracies at rates not seen since the Gilded Age—but he shows insufficient recognition for the necessity of working-class self-activity as the key source of social change.

Of course workers' councils are not cure-alls. Of course, valorizing any particular institutional form is shortsighted if not ahistorical. Of course reforms aimed at legislation that come with teeth and not just gums is part of any socialist tool kit, but then so are the quotidian acts of working people central to class struggle. Councils when no one wants them? Bad idea! Councils set up by workers themselves in opposition to the present order? Good idea! Councils versus parliaments? Luxemburg certainly thought so—her support for contesting elections to the National Assembly was strategic. She believed workers were not ready for—or convinced of the need for—self-rule, but then Bronner completely rules out dual power and councils on the model of the Paris Commune or the soviets as a challenge to a centralized and formal representative democracy. “Where's the agency for a social revolution,” he in effect asks, “if there is no revolutionary class and thinking there will be is counterfactual if not delusional?”

If many radicals are overly sanguine about the ease in which councils could step in and replace existing governments, Bronner shows in his interventions no reason to rule the possibility out. How else to start a new society than to base it on the structures workers themselves create? I'm all for evening scores with vulgar Marxists, but why at the expense of our class's outstanding moments?

***Why the Failure of German Social Democracy to
Defend the “Social” Sphere?***

So how did a mass socialist organization end up as a key enabler of German capital? How did a party that could write in the Erfurt Program, its 1891 founding document, that “the working class cannot carry on its economic contests, and cannot develop its economic organization, without political rights” or “bring about the transference of the means of production into the possession of the community, without having obtained political power,”¹⁴ within one generation become a junior partner of the military and the big industrials, abandoning any interest in transferring private property to community ownership? How did the party produce a Gustave Noske, a key Majority Socialist, who would proudly name himself the “bloodhound”¹⁵ of the counterrevolution after organizing the volunteer corps that murdered Luxemburg and Liebknecht in January 1919? There are a number of explanations:

- There was the strength and stability of German capital even after the collapse of the Central Command’s Western offensive, with Victor Serge attesting that the German upper class was “the most educated, the most organized, the most conscious bourgeoisie of all.”¹⁶ In contrast to the Russian upper classes, this one was not yet defeated internally or politically exhausted. Minor concessions and government titles dependent on military backing were all it took to housebreak the SPD leadership.
- There was also—and this is the Leninist explanation—no revolutionary party to shape opposition to the war and the Sacred Union, turning the pacifist fight against the war into a battle against capital, its instigator and benefactor. Luxemburg and the radicals operated as a rump caucus in the SPD. By the time war was declared, it was too late to form a coherent revolutionary opposition capable of withstanding the military government’s repression.
- Then there was the hegemony of opportunists and careerists not only in the SPD apparatus but in the national unions, marshaled against Marxists, including against Karl Kautsky, the “pope” of Marxism, who could win no greater prize than militant language concessions at annual conferences before going on

to form the Independent Socialist Party of Germany (USPD). Unlike in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where the Bolsheviks had the backing of the majority of workers and the provisional government twisted in the wind, the German revolutionaries functioned as leaders and tacticians in comparative isolation, though Liebknecht had in effect well-deserved rock-star status among urban workers. Even the declaration of the Republic by the Majority Socialists was prompted more by fear of the far left than by a reading of the need to form a workers' state. Philipp Scheidemann, destined to be a future president only to be assassinated by the fascists in 1922, preempted Liebknecht's call for a workers' and sailors' government by proclaiming instead a labor government—a move that ironically received no favor from Fritz Ebert, who was then in tenuous and secret negotiations with the army.

Instead of joining the revolution, the SPD leaders chose to either co-opt or kill it. In the end, they did both, despite the clear intention of Luxemburg and her followers to “never assume governmental power unless it is supported by the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletariat in Germany, and in no other way except with their conscious acceptance of the ideas, aims, and fighting methods of the Spartakusbund.”¹⁷ This statement sums up not just Luxemburg's repeated emphasis on building a class ready to rule but her failure to think tactically given the conjuncture.

And the Majority Socialists had other choices. While Germany was not the wrecked state and devastated civil society that was Russia in 1917, it was far from stable, in the view of its own ruling elite. Then Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg was among those of the army General Staff who met with the Kaiser's cabinet to tell them that “revolution was standing at the door, and we had the choice of meeting it with dictatorship or concessions. A parliamentary government seemed to be the best weapon of defense”¹⁸—especially for preserving the highly political army and its Prussian officers corps, which the SPD government did retain, as promised. Hindenburg would later admit that the grand strategy of the government was, in the words of the Kaiser's secretary of state, “to forestall an upheaval from below by a revolution from above.”¹⁹

So committed were the socialist leaders to the policies of *Burgfrieden*, the social peace to which all the Reichstag parties yoked themselves for the war's duration, and so tied to the rhetoric of defending the sanctified fatherland that when the German Right later blamed the war's defeat on "traitorous" socialists in government selling out an army "unbeaten in the field," Ebert sued his "calumniators." He did that, rather than what Pachter notes would have been the more appropriate course, "boasting" that he had done a public service by bringing the slaughter and the plainly lost war to an end.²⁰

So the SPD leaders weren't victims of the war²¹; they were its enablers and its home guard inside the workers' movement, actively and systematically fingering opponents, and saying that the class struggle was the antithesis of the war's beneficial aims. Like Luxemburg, Trotsky, living in exile in Switzerland in 1914, knew better, writing in *The War and the International* that a German victory

can produce only one result—territorial acquisitions at the expense of Belgium, France and Russia, commercial treaties forced upon her enemies, and new colonies. The class struggle of the proletariat would then be placed upon the basis of the imperialist hegemony of Germany, the working class would be interested in the maintenance and development of this hegemony, and revolutionary socialism would for a long time be condemned to the role of a propagandist sect.²²

Writing in the *Junius Pamphlet* the same year, Luxemburg notes:

Under the circumstances the question of victory or defeat becomes, for the European working class, in its political exactly as in its economic aspects, a choice between two beatings. It is therefore nothing short of a dangerous madness for the French Socialists to believe that they can deal a deathblow to militarism and imperialism, and clear the road for peaceful democracy, by overthrowing Germany. Imperialism and its servant, militarism, will reappear after every victory and after every defeat in this war. There can be but one exception: if the international proletariat, through its intervention, should overthrow all previous calculations.

She adds:

“The modern proletariat comes out of historical tests differently [than did the bourgeoisie in its revolutions]. Its tasks and its errors are both gigantic: no prescription, no schema valid for every case, no infallible leader to show it the path to follow. Historical experience is its only schoolmistress. Its thorny way to self-emancipation is paved not only with immeasurable suffering but also with countless errors. The aim of its journey—its emancipation depends on this—is whether the proletariat can learn from its own errors. Self-criticism, remorseless, cruel, and going to the core of things is the life’s breath and light of the proletarian movement. The fall of the socialist proletariat in the present world war is unprecedented. It is a misfortune for humanity. But socialism will be lost only if the international proletariat fails to measure the depth of this fall, if it refuses to learn from it.”²³

As Arthur Rosenberg summed it up in 1928, writing as a former member of the Reichstag Committee of Inquiry into the causes of the German collapse during the First World War and challenging the notion that the SPD caused the defeat by backstabbing the Kaiser’s governments:

[The party leaders] contented themselves instead with emphasizing that Germany should not attempt any conquests and the [hugely disproportional] electoral system in Prussia should be reformed . . . [They] feared that if they took up a determined attitude in opposition to the Government, the entire working class would rise in rebellion, and the German defense collapse in consequence.”²⁴

So if the SPD leaders did any backstabbing, it wasn’t of those militarists prosecuting the war.

The Trade Union Apparatus as a Conservatizing Force

While Luxemburg was battling revisionism as an ideology, it was alive and well in the party’s practice, the outcome of conservative trade unions’ influence and a new breed of *realpolitik* party officials beholden to them. As Carl Schorske describes it, by the turn of the

new century the unions ceased to be recruiting agencies for the SPD, coming into their own as “great and wealthy organizations, offering services in the field of social security which the state was unwilling to provide. Inevitably, the interest of the unions and their members became more and more closely identified with the existing economic system.” It was what Robert Michels called “the replacement of agitators by the schooled official with specialized knowledge,” as he counterpoised “the glowing idealist to the lukewarm materialist” who was interested less in the much vaunted final conflict for the broad proletariat as with the interim contract for the members.²⁵

As early as 1905, the party at its Jena convention weighed in on the importance of mass strikes even as the affiliated trade unions forbade members even broaching the subject. At the 1906 Mannheim conclave, the unions even won veto power over party actions, even as radical resolutions on war and socialism were routinely adopted. A leading party paper bemoaned “the revisionism we killed in the party rises again in greater strength in the trade unions.”²⁶ In effect the SPD had morphed, in deed if not yet in word, into a purely reformist and accommodating party, even as by 1913, in the midst of another cyclical economic crisis, the government employed police and mass jailings to break strikes, imprison strike leaders, crack down on boycotts, and even assault informational picketers.

With the war’s outbreak in 1914, the SPD joined the other parties in offering the Kaiser’s government *carte blanche* to decide not only military but also economic and political issues, what Schorske calls “stagnation by consent” as opposed to the prewar’s “stagnation by stalemate.” The ongoing state of siege meant the military only had to answer to the Kaiser, leaving all the center parties as well as the SPD as at best advisers and courtiers. For labor leaders, “Once they accepted the primacy of foreign policy [they] assumed the function of disciplining the labor movement in the interest of the state.”²⁷

With the onset of the war and the sociological and ideological fissures in the party ruptured, no coherent organization emerged to do what Luxemburg urged: turn the growing opposition to the war into a war against the old order at home. Even the workers’ and soldiers’ councils, themselves products of mass strikes and harbingers of a new social order, were too new and too loosely based to offer much

direction. There was, as Schorske puts it starkly, “no central leadership which, like Lenin’s in Russia, pursued a conscious strategy in the interest of the single aim of the seizure of power, no cold political planning in which the masses were viewed not solely as the subjects of politics, but as its objects.”²⁸

So the structure of the Spartakusbund itself—if not necessarily the predilection of its leaders—militated against any strident sense of timing or of tactics for the moment. What was so refreshing about Luxemburg—her belief that revolutions had to be the work of masses of people mobilizing in their own collective interests—was paralleled by a shrunk sense of actually seizing the moment. It may be unfair to associate her thinking with “spontaneity” (the word really means that somebody else did the organizing), but it does suggest a failing no less significant than Lenin’s fascination with maneuvers and his substitution of the party for the class or Kautsky’s efforts to reconcile the irreconcilable. Luxemburg had no organization or even infrastructure to coordinate antistate activities even as the Majority Socialists were locked in as junior partners in the Wilhelmine state and later as titular heads of the first Weimar government, wholly beholden to the military tops. Not until August 1917 did left radicals formally reject the division between unions and parties that had allowed the trade union apparatus to determine practical party policy.

Paul Mattick Sr., a consistent advocate of council communism and a fierce Lenin critic, argued that a parliamentary regime populated by Social Democrats collaborating with German capital

was the immediate and only goal of German Social Democracy. Its reluctance to extend the revolution into the economic sphere was even more pronounced in the trade union leadership, which set itself in opposition “to any socialist experiment and any form of socialization at a time when the population required work and food,” as though the socializations would come at the expense of providing work and food. The close wartime cooperation between the trade unions and private industry was reinforced, in order to prevent and break strikes and to combat the politicization of the workers via the factory councils in largescale enterprises. In brief, the old labor movement in its entirety became an unabashed

counter-revolutionary force within a revolution that had [placed] political power in its hands.²⁹

Luxemburg Today

How to build a society that isn't piratical and vampire-like is a question confronting socialists in Europe and the United States. In response to the austerity measures demanded by Germany and the European Union officials, the PIIGS countries (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, and Spain) are walking two paths: their governments are capitulating while resistance movements are growing. These movements may not be enough.

In Greece, SYRIZA, a leftist party that is poised to win the next election (it garnered 27 percent of the popular vote in 2012) faces exactly the political divide that marked German socialism in Luxemburg's time: either govern through a deal with big capital—in these cases not even national capital—or rule from the left without the sort of organic institutional support the Bolsheviks initially had or that Luxemburg thought was necessary to rule. A radical restructuring of the Greek economy would be the perfect pretext for a military coup, even a fascist uprising, unless SYRIZA in government has not only a voting majority in parliament but workers and soldiers mobilized in its defense. (It may in fact have that basis in labor support, with 29 general strikes waged from 2008 through the first quarter of 2013, far higher than in the other PIIGS countries, which are also seeing general strikes against austerity.³⁰)

I don't worry about SYRIZA; I worry with it. I hope it does take office in the next election. At best, SYRIZA can serve as a living model demonstrating how a progressive government in a capitalist state is handicapped by forces arrayed against it. At worst, it consists of dead men (and women) walking. But if it governs by placating the EU through a rhetorically kinder variation on austerity measures at the expense of its working-class base, it risks either losing the next election or physical extinction from an emboldened right. Or both. And like socialists in the German Revolution, its leaders risk either becoming enablers of murder or getting murdered themselves if they don't take steps to create dual power. They may in fact be doing so. If they are, both Luxemburg and Lenin have things to tell them.

Notes

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11. *Ibid.*, pp. 80–84.
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13. Isaac Deutscher, *On Socialist Man* (New York: Merit Publishers, 1967), p. 21.
14. *The Erfurt Program* (1891), <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/1891/erfurt-program.htm> (accessed April 18, 2013).
15. Quoted in Marcel Liebman, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 345.
16. Victor Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (1930), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/serge/1930/year-one/ch10.htm> (accessed April 18, 2013).
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18. Quoted in Ruth Fischer, *Stalin and German Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 54.

19. Quoted in Pierre Broué, *The German Revolution, 1917–1923* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2006), p. 130.
20. Henry Pachter, *The Fall and Rise of Europe* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), p. 98.
21. In his aside to Camfield, Bronner suggests that the Majority Socialists' support for the war was based in part on their being realists "constrained" by bad times, presumably to live to fight another day. As I argue, there were ample alternatives to the SPD's direction. Both structural and careerist reasons better explain their morphing into the Kaiser's policemen. They lived indeed, but not in order to "fight the power."
22. Leon Trotsky, *The War and the International* (1915), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1914/war/part2.htm#ch05> (accessed April 18, 2013).
23. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis of German Social Democracy* (1915), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/> (accessed April 18, 2013).
24. Arthur Rosenberg, *Imperial Germany: The Birth of the German Republic, 1871–1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 117, 170.
25. Carl Schorske, *German Social Democracy, 1905–1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 14.
26. Ibid, pp. 51–52.
27. Ibid, p. 293.
28. Ibid, pp. 323–24.
29. Paul Mattick, *Marxism: Last Refuge of the Bourgeoisie?* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1983), p. 269.
30. Joseph Choonara, "The Class Struggles in Europe," *International Socialism* No. 138 (Spring 2013), p. 49.

APPENDIX

Reflections on Red Rosa: An Interview with Stephen Eric Bronner

Conducted by Jason Schulman

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 *tout 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 rightwing 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 taxicab 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 Freiligrath—“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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