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# ROSA LUXEMBURG

Bände 1 und 2



BÖCHNER

## Political Action, Revolutionary Parties, and the Transition to a Republic of Councils

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As in a Hegelian recurrent spiral, the first decades of the 21st century eerily resemble the first quarter of the 20th century, when the contradictions of capitalism increased class struggle, and the political empowerment of the working classes was met with rising totalitarian force. Rosa Luxemburg played a fundamental role in this conjuncture, pushing for the self-emancipation of the proletariat through political action, for which she paid with her life at the hands of a squad of nationalist soldiers. At a time when we are witnessing a rise in far-right parties and nationalist leaders around the world – from *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in Germany, *Rassemblement National* in France, and *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* in Poland to Donald Trump in the United States, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil – within societies in which an overgrowth of oligarchic power has resulted in the precarity of the working classes, many of them immigrants without the protections afforded by citizenship, it is imperative not only to study Luxemburg's work for its insights and lessons but also to pick up where she left off; her lucid writings are a roadmap for revolutionary politics »from below« in times of crisis.

Luxemburg's writings and political project were unique because she denounced and fought not only the oligarchic power of the capitalist class but also the oligarchic tendencies growing within revolutionary socialist parties. She passionately attacked both the revisionism of socialist parties in Europe and the ultra-centralism of the Bolsheviks in Russia. This fierce critical stance made her a threat to the increasingly accom-

modating Social Democratic Party in Germany (SPD) and relegated her to the margins of Marxist thought after the Bolshevik experiment in Russia became the main alternative to capitalism. She was one of the few able to foresee the institutionalization of the revolutionary class and the centralist path as a failed strategy; the revolutionary party, imposing a top-down project, would »emancipate« the working classes from capitalism from above, only to force them to pledge their allegiance to the socialist state. For Luxemburg it was clear that liberty for the proletariat could not be achieved through this centralist path in which there is no autonomy of the workers from the state; workers need to emancipate themselves, in political action, through their own working-class institutions able to wield power to control the state.

In this chapter I analyze Luxemburg's ideas on the foundational character of political action, the role of the revolutionary party in enabling the workers' council system, and the necessary conditions to transition from a capitalist to a socialist society. I argue Luxemburg presents us with a constitutional scheme in which democratic rights such as free speech and association have strong protections, and there is a dual structure of power, in which two sources of authority – the liberal democratic order and its proceduralist justifications, and the proletarian order based on the collective activity of the councils – compete for power. This hybrid model of representative government and workers' councils, moreover, seems to be temporal and short-lived since; according to Luxemburg, oligarchs are not likely to give up their power and be ruled over by proletarian law without bloodshed. Through Luxemburg's materialist approach to the organization of power, the establishment and development of proletarian organs of power, far from being an idealist position, appears as the necessary material ground from which the new socialist society can begin to be collectively conceived. The politics of collective power, organized and deliberative, comes into focus through the lens of Luxemburg's thought as the only one able to guarantee emancipation, being able not only to break with the current legal expression of society but to create a new socialist one, based on the political activity of workers' councils.

## Political Action and Collective Emancipation

According to the political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), the most important contribution of Rosa Luxemburg to our understanding of freedom and emancipation is the foundational character of political action.<sup>1</sup> Liberty requires not only an original revolutionary collective action, but also self-emancipatory political action during ordinary times. Liberty is an ongoing project, not an ideal end to be achieved, and the socialist society is that which allows for liberty as self-emancipation to be exercised. It is this conception of liberty as the political activity of the common people that distinguishes proletarian from bourgeois revolutions. Moreover, this commitment to workers' political activity has made proletarian revolutions much more difficult than bourgeois revolutions, which need only to overthrow the official power at the center and to replace a dozen or so persons in authority. »We have to work from beneath, and this corresponds to the mass character of our revolution, which aims at the foundation and base of the social constitution; it corresponds to the character of the present proletarian revolution that the conquest of political power must come not from above but from below.«<sup>2</sup>

Even if she was mislabeled as an idealist<sup>3</sup> – an ideological position she decried as working *against* proletarian emancipation –, Rosa Luxemburg's thought is deeply materialist. From her assessments of the SPD in Germany and revolutionary politics in Russia, she was able

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- 1 Hannah Arendt: A Heroine of Revolution, in: New York Review of Books, October 6, 1966, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1966/10/06/a-heroine-of-revolution/>. For an analysis of Luxemburg and Arendt, see Maria Tamboukou: Imagining and Living the Revolution: An Arendtian Reading of Rosa Luxemburg's Letters and Writings, in: Feminist Review 106/2014, pp. 27–42.
  - 2 Rosa Luxemburg: Our Program and the Political Situation, in: Peter Hudis and Kevin Anderson (Eds.): The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, New York 2004, pp. 372–373.
  - 3 Norman Geras argues her thought has also been mischaracterized as determinism, fatalism, and spontaneism. The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg, New York 2015, p. 21.

to unveil power relations and their trajectories, analyzing them from the impact they had on the material conditions of subordination of the working classes. She came early to the understanding that Marx's and Engels' insight after the experience of the Commune was correct: that the »working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes.«<sup>4</sup> And as historical processes made it manifest in Russia, »where a proletariat almost wholly unorganized created a comprehensive network of organisational appendages in a year-and-a-half of stormy revolutionary struggle,«<sup>5</sup> the people are able to create their own institutions to lead the revolution and exert power over government. The socialist state needs to be constructed from the bottom up, apart and distinct from the bourgeois seats of power, through its own class-based, local organs of proletarian power. For Luxemburg, if the material conditions for exercising collective power do not exist, there is no possible path to socialism and thus no real freedom for the working classes. To think otherwise is indeed to be clouded by »illusions« that lead to an untenable idealist position: the belief that socialism could be realized by decree.

Luxemburg sees it as imperative to first dispel the illusion that to achieve socialism it is only »necessary to overthrow the old government, to set up a socialist government at the head of affairs, and then to inaugurate socialism by decree.«<sup>6</sup> The proletarian masses need to realize that they cannot be liberated from the top but need to emancipate themselves through political action. The »essence of socialist society« is that »the great laboring mass ceases to be a dominated mass« – a collection of »dead machines assigned their place in production by capital« – and workers become agents giving »conscious,

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4 Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels: *The Communist Manifesto*, in: Robert C. Tucker (Ed.): *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York 1978. Quoted in Luxemburg: *Our Program*, p. 358.

5 Luxemburg: *The Mass Strike*, in: *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, p. 157.

6 Luxemburg: *Our Program*, p. 368.

free, and autonomous direction« to their lives in common.<sup>7</sup> This requires a transformation of the proletariat, because »one cannot realize socialism with lazy, frivolous, egoistic, thoughtless and indifferent human beings« – individual men and women have to cultivate »inner self-discipline, intellectual maturity, moral ardor, a sense of dignity and responsibility,« what Luxemburg deems »a complete inner birth of the proletariat.«<sup>8</sup> Moreover, this shift among proletarians during revolutionary moments can only come from the workers themselves, initiated and maintained by autonomous collective action.

Socialism, which appears constitutively tied to local councils as sites of self-rule, cannot be established by decree but »can only be won by a long chain of powerful struggles, in which the proletariat, under the leadership of the Social Democracy, will learn to take hold of the rudder of society to become instead of the powerless victim of history, its conscious guide.«<sup>9</sup> The only way for workers to undergo this transformation, from a dominated to an empowered class, is by exercising power in the »school of action«<sup>10</sup> »through constant, vital, reciprocal contact between the masses of the people and their organs, the workers' and soldiers' councils.«<sup>11</sup> The masses need to be educated in the art of power by wielding power and, in this process, transform »themselves into the free and independent directors of this process,« with the sense of »responsibility proper to active members of the collectivity.«<sup>12</sup> Political action by the workers themselves is not for Luxemburg a mere means to an end, but rather an intrinsic part of her strand of socialism that claimed that »[o]ur motto is: In the beginning was the act. And the

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7 Ibid., pp. 350–351.

8 Luxemburg: *The Socialization of Labor*, in: *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, p. 348.

9 Luxemburg: *The Junius Pamphlet*, in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, p. 321.

10 Luxemburg: *Our Program*, p. 372.

11 Luxemburg: *What Does the Spartacus League Want?*, in: *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, p. 351.

12 Ibid.

act must be that the workers' and soldiers' councils realize their mission and learn to become the sole public power of the whole nation.«<sup>13</sup>

For this process of self-emancipation to exist, for the possibility of workers' councils to be established and to operate, the state needs to guarantee democratic rights. For the political activity of the laboring masses, there must be »freedom of the press, the rights of association and assembly [...] it is a well-known and indisputable fact that without a free and untrammelled press, without the unlimited right of association and assemblage, the rule of the broad masses of the people is entirely unthinkable.«<sup>14</sup> These rights are for Luxemburg democratic not because they are necessary for the electoral system to function properly, but in the sense that these rights are the necessary legal conditions for the organized power of the common people to be established and nurtured. Consequently, no government, not even a truly popular government, should curtail these rights that allow the demos to engage autonomously and collectively in political action. Not even a republic of councils, where sovereignty is in the hands of workers' councils, can curtail these rights without undermining their own foundations. According to Luxemburg, proletarian liberty is political and intrinsically connected with the freedom to dissent:

»Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party – however numerous they may be – is no freedom at all. 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.«<sup>15</sup>

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13 Luxemburg: *Our Program*, p. 372.

14 Luxemburg: *The Russian Revolution*, in: *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, p. 304

15 *Ibid.*

In addition to democratic rights being universal and guaranteed especially to dissenting voices, Luxemburg argued that it was necessary for these rights not only to be formally respected, but also to be backed by material conditions and to be exercised through political action. The freedom to speak out, protest, and organize are for Luxemburg fundamental democratic rights that need to be respected by all free governments, which should guarantee its proper exercise. In this way, Luxemburg goes beyond formalism and argues that the provision of rights needs to conform to the goals guiding their codification rather than to abstract principles and rules. »Every right of suffrage, like any political right in general, is not to be measured by some sort of abstract scheme of justice, or in terms of any other bourgeois-democratic phrases, but by the social and economic relationships for which it is designed.«<sup>16</sup>

Her materialist analysis of democratic rights was informed by the conclusion she drew from her critical approach to women's political rights: that formal equal rights »conform quite harmoniously with the bourgeois state.«<sup>17</sup> Women's political rights, because they do not »encroach upon the domination of capital,« do not bring the emancipation of women from the exploitation of domestic labor or overturn the state.<sup>18</sup> This coexistence of formal rights and domination in the case of women came to reinforce what she had learned from Marx's analysis of individual rights: that formal rights are not only an inherently partial form of freedom but that they also contribute to the endurance of relations of domination that are presupposed even if legally abolished.<sup>19</sup> For rights to be emancipatory they need to be grounded in material conditions and relations of power. Just as expanding the right to vote to include women does not bring their emancipation from domestic domination, giving formal political rights to the mass-

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16 Ibid, p. 302.

17 Luxemburg: The Junius Pamphlet, p. 244.

18 Ibid.

19 Marx: On the Jewish Question, in: Marx-Engels Reader, p. 33.

es without actual collective political activity would not only not contribute to the emancipation of the proletariat from the capitalist state, but would also allow for the endurance of relations of domination while giving the appearance of liberty.

Political activity – only possible when democratic rights are respected – is for Luxemburg crucial for developing class consciousness among the proletariat. She argues that the active exercise of democratic rights is indispensable for the proletariat not only because it renders the »conquest of power both *necessary* and *possible*,«<sup>20</sup> but more importantly, »because only through the exercise of its democratic rights, in the struggle for democracy, can the proletariat become aware of its class interests and its historic task.«<sup>21</sup> This does not mean, however, that the exercise of democratic rights should be the final goal of the revolution. Even if Luxemburg sees value in parliamentary activity and trade unionism due to the class awareness it promotes through party organizing and as a means for advancing workers' interests, she sees grave danger in trading means for ends and conceiving the party as the main goal of socialist politics.<sup>22</sup> When the means are »separated from the movement« and »made an end in themselves, then such activity not only does not lead to the final goal of socialism but moves in a precisely opposite direction.«<sup>23</sup>

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20 Luxemburg: Reform or Revolution, in Helen Scott (Ed.): The Essential Rosa Luxemburg. Reform or Revolution and the Mass Strike, Chicago 2008, p. 93.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 67.

23 Ibid. Luxemburg objected to »making a virtue out of necessity and then turning it into a veritable principle.« Raya Dunayevskaya: Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution, Chicago 1991, p. 55.

## Revolutionary Parties and the Centralist Strategy

The political party, like any other organization, tends to oligarchization.<sup>24</sup> Vanguard leaders sooner or later become detached from their bases, a process that accelerates once the revolutionary party is in government. Soon, the people cease to be political actors and become militant supporters and/or mere recipients of state policies. While interests can be represented, political action cannot. For Luxemburg, liberty for workers cannot be granted from the top through law and policy, but is gained through the struggle from below and maintained through collective action. Workers need to become political actors, not to reach a perpetual state of freedom, but to periodically materialize liberty through collective political action. Consequently, the goal of revolution is not to achieve a certain preset political program or to establish a political party to carry it out, but to bring the working classes to act and become political actors capable of wielding power and ultimately control the state.

Luxemburg warns that, if the party becomes the goal of revolution, the political action of the common people toward their own emancipation would be demoted and sidelined, as ended up happening in Russia. Her prescient critique in 1904 of the »ultra-centralist« strategy pursued by Vladimir Lenin, which she further developed in her 1918 analysis on the October Revolution, was unpopular<sup>25</sup> since the events in Russia quickly became the model to emulate. She accused Lenin's revolutionary party of strengthening »the conservatism that springs inevitably« from social democratic parties, which tend to defend what they have gained against »further innovation at a greater

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24 Robert Michels: *Political Parties. A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, New York 1959.

25 Already in the 1925 Comintern, her political ideas were being demonized by the supporters of Bolshevik socialism. John Peter Netti: *Rosa Luxemburg*, Vol. 2, London 1966, pp. 533, 800–801, 805–806; Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, New York 2015, pp. 28–29.

scale.«<sup>26</sup> After taking over the state, the Bolsheviks aimed at implementing a program to stabilize the revolutionary thrust, but instead of harnessing the revolutionary spirit of the workers' councils, they attempted to »oversee« and control the councils, which effectively stifled political action. Luxemburg saw in Lenin's centralism not the creative, constituent energy of the masses, but the »sterile spirit of the night-watchman state,«<sup>27</sup> a state that is there to police the revolution rather than to nurture it. Lenin's aim at controlling the party was for her concerned »with *narrowing* and not with *broadening*, with *tying the movement up* and not with *drawing it together*.«<sup>28</sup>

In her analysis of the October Revolution, she denounced the progression of the centralist strategy and condemned the revolutionary government's »cool contempt« for the democratic rights of suffrage, freedom of the press, and assemblage.<sup>29</sup> Even if the party appears as an indispensable means to conquer the state, neither the conquest of the bourgeois state nor the maintenance of the party structure is connected to the final goal of a socialist society, which can only be built from the ground up by the workers themselves. Consequently, actions by the party to control the movement by undermining democratic rights are ultimately self-defeating.

»To be sure, every democratic institution has its limits and shortcomings, things which it doubtless shares with all other human institutions. But 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

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26 Luxemburg: The Mass Strike, in: The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, p. 255.

27 Ibid., 256.

28 Emphasis in the original. Ibid., 256.

29 Luxemburg: The Beginning, in: The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, p. 294.

the active, untrammelled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people.«<sup>30</sup>

The »deprivation« of democratic rights under a socialist government is especially damaging for the revolution because it undermines the collective power of the proletariat and therefore the internal checking power to correct for the inevitable institutional weaknesses of the political and economic systems.<sup>31</sup> Dissent is essential if the socialist government is to be truly democratic and successful. Workers' councils need to be autonomous from the government to openly disagree about courses of action chosen by vanguard leaders that seem contrary to their liberty. However, the councils were denied this autonomy while the government freed itself from the purview of the soviets.

Even if Lenin was a strong supporter of the soviets in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution, arguing that »politically the Soviet of Workers' Deputies should be regarded as the embryo of a *provisional revolutionary government*,« his embrace of centralism once in power stifled the autonomous development of the worker's councils.<sup>32</sup> According to Luxemburg, only the »correct« organs of the workers were conceived as valid interlocutors, and even those were being deprived of the necessary liberties to operate autonomously. By suppressing grassroots politics, the revolutionary government, occupying the oligarchic state machinery, had established not a dictatorship of the proletariat (soviets) but a dictatorship of the selected few (party leaders) that the masses were forced to support. Luxemburg lamented that

»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

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30 Luxemburg: *The Beginning*, p. 302.

31 Luxemburg: *The Russian Revolution*, p. 304.

32 Vladimir Lenin: *Our Tasks and the Soviet of Workers' Deputies*, in: *Collected Works*, Moscow 1965, vol. 10, p. 19.

elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a 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. Public life gradually falls asleep, a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule. Among them, in reality only a dozen outstanding heads do the leading and an elite of the working class is invited from time to time to meetings where they are to applaud the speeches of the leaders, and to approve proposed resolutions unanimously – at bottom, then, a clique affair – a dictatorship, to be sure, not the dictatorship of the proletariat but only the dictatorship of a handful of politicians, that is a dictatorship in the bourgeois sense.«<sup>33</sup>

Just as the workers' movement, long excluded from bourgeois places of power and traditional parliamentary politics, cannot be reduced to a socialist party run by a group of enlightened political leaders, the workers' revolutionary government cannot be equated to the government of the revolutionary vanguard. Luxemburg saw clearly that what was being set up in Russia was not the dictatorship of the proletariat but a dictatorship of the Bolshevik party, which would have disastrous consequences for the liberty of workers.

Before coming into power Lenin denounced labor laws, supposedly designed to protect workers, as the legalization of exploitation, which deepened the dependence of workers not only on individual employers but also on the system of production as a whole.<sup>34</sup> However, after he began wielding state power, he turned »instrumentalist and statist,«<sup>35</sup> moving away from popular collective action and toward

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33 Luxemburg: *The Beginning*, p. 307.

34 See Camila Vergara: *Lenin and the Materialist Critique of Law*, in: Alla Ivanchikov/Robert Maclean (Eds.): *The Futures of Lenin*. Albany, NY, forthcoming.

35 Jane Burbank: *Lenin and the Law in Revolutionary Russia*, in: *Slavic Review* 54/1995, no. 1, p. 42.

a centralized socialist state. Lenin approved the new Labor Code of 1922, which was based on the capitalist idea of labor power as commodity-producing, and incorporated, alongside strong labor protections, many of the existing provisions that he had previously denounced as exploitative. Oppressive labor laws endured because they were seen as necessary to discipline the workforce, while the source of domination gravitated from individual employers toward the state, which would eventually become the main owner and manager of the productive forces. Even if the workers were granted welfare benefits, political liberty to dissent and self-govern was completely foreclosed.

In Germany, the incipient council system also came under attack from the SPD. Even if Luxemburg prioritized the mass strike over workers' councils in her early writings, after the SPD entered into the governing coalition and turned against the workers, Luxemburg went back to the councils, conceiving them as fundamental institutions of the socialist revolution. This shift in her focus from the mass strike to the councils appears not only as a strategic move after the state machinery had been partially seized by the SPD – which would have made a mass strike more difficult to pull off – but also as a political project coming out of her critical analysis of the Bolsheviks' centralism and the death of public life. According to Luxemburg, workers in Russia »came to realize that what has been pasted together and called a socialist government is nothing but a government representing the bourgeois counter-revolution, and that whoever continues to tolerate such a state of affairs is working against the proletariat and against socialism.«<sup>36</sup> To push back against the debasement of worker power and continue to oppose the war through revolutionary methods, in 1916 Luxemburg founded the Spartacus League<sup>37</sup> together with Karl Liebknecht (1871–1919), Clara Zetkin (1857–1933), and Franz Mehring

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36 Luxemburg: *Our Program*, p. 367.

37 Spartacus led the largest slave rebellion during the Roman republic (73–71 BCE).

(1846–1919). In a series of speeches published in the League's newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* – in the two months she was out of prison, before being shot by the government-sponsored Freikorps<sup>38</sup> – Luxemburg denounced »the systematic destruction of the system of workers' and soldiers' councils« and called for reinvigorating the council system by spreading its mode of organization to the peasantry.<sup>39</sup> For her, because the revolution aims »at the foundation and base of the social constitution,« it needs to »work from beneath,« and the duty of the revolutionary party should be to support councils as part of a revolutionary democratic constitution.<sup>40</sup> The path of the revolution therefore is not centralization, but the strengthening and spreading of the council system: »All power in the hands of the working masses, in the hands of the workers' and soldiers' councils, protection of the work of revolution against its lurking enemies – this is the guiding principle of all measures to be taken by the revolutionary government.«<sup>41</sup>

Because without the material conditions for local worker power, »the naked decrees of socialization by the highest revolutionary authorities are by themselves empty phrases,«<sup>42</sup> the main revolutionary task of the socialist government is to promote a proletarian institutional structure. The councils are the constituent organs of the people; »the symbol of the new socialist social order borne by the present proletarian revolution, the symbol of the class character of its true task, and of the class character of the political organ which is meant to execute this task, is: the workers' council, based on representation

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38 The Freikorps were a gang of nationalist soldiers. The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, Introduction, p. 29.

39 Luxemburg: Our Program, p. 371.

40 Ibid., 72–73.

41 Luxemburg: The Socialization of Labor, in: The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, p. 343.

42 Luxemburg: Spartacus League, p. 351.

of the urban and rural proletariat.«<sup>43</sup> If the final objective of the movement is the socialist society, in which the working classes are free from domination, not being »ruled over« but ruling themselves, the immediate objective of the movement should be to »replace the inherited organs of bourgeois class rule« that exert power over the working class, with a working-class political infrastructure aimed at self-rule, at cultivating a proper political character and activity among the proletariat by adequately training them to »occupy all the posts, supervise all functions, measure all official needs by the standard of its own class interests and the tasks of socialism.«<sup>44</sup> To accomplish this, Luxemburg argues for active organizing and institution-building at the local level, »down to the tiniest parish.« With regard to the program, this meant »fighting step by step, hand-to-hand, in every province, in every city, in every village, in every municipality in order to take and transfer all the powers of the state bit by bit from the bourgeoisie to the workers and soldiers councils.«<sup>45</sup>

Power needs to be exercised collectively by workers themselves at the local level, and then garnered and channeled, so that the workers can exert control over the state. This grassroots path to power is for Luxemburg the only one that allows for the liberty of the working classes and is therefore able to achieve a socialist system and maintain it. The role of the vanguard party is crucial in the systematization of the council system and as an overseer of proper procedures conducive to liberty. Among the first necessary steps the revolutionary government should take to foster the council system<sup>46</sup> are 1) to improve

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43 Luxemburg: National Assembly, in: Marxist Archive, [www.marxists.org/archive/Luxemburg/1918/11/20.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/Luxemburg/1918/11/20.htm).

44 Luxemburg: Spartacus League, p. 351.

45 Luxemburg: Our Program, p. 372.

46 For an account of the development and operation of soldiers, workers and peasants' councils see Allan Mitchell: *Revolution in Bavaria, 1918–1919. The Eisner Regime and the Soviet Republic*, Princeton 1965, or the recently published German study on the revolution and councils' republic in Low-

the councils »so that the first chaotic and impulsive gestures of their formation are replaced by a conscious process of understanding the goals, tasks and methods of the revolution;« 2) to ensure that they have regularly scheduled meetings and adequate power-sharing processes, and 3) to establish a »national council of workers and soldiers in order to establish the proletariat of all Germany as a class, as a compact political power, and to make it the bulwark and impetus of the revolution.«<sup>47</sup> The revolutionary government would therefore have the task not only to systematize and standardize the procedures of self-rule used in the councils, but also to establish a new national institution that would further construct the workers' class identity, empowering them to keep energizing the revolutionary process. This national organ is not a representative institution, with elected party leaders, but rather a delegate institution through which the workers' local resolutions acquire a national character.

In addition to a delegate organ of proletarian action, the national council would play a crucial role in fomenting class consciousness and unity among workers scattered throughout the country: »Without the conscious will and action of the majority of the proletariat, there can be no socialism. In order to intensify this consciousness, to steel this will, to organize this action, a class organ is necessary: a national council of the urban and rural proletarians.«<sup>48</sup> The organized masses are for Luxemburg the agents and guardians of their emancipatory process, and therefore the duty of the revolutionary government, elected by the masses to take control of the state and wield its power, is to foster the institutional organization of the proletarian masses. The party should not be guided by centralist or revisionist strategies, but by the need to strengthen the council system through which workers can

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er Franconia, Frank Jacob: *Revolution und Räterepublik in Unterfranken. Eine landesgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Verlauf und Folgen der Revolution von 1918/19 an der bayerischen Peripherie*, Würzburg 2019.

47 Luxemburg: *The Socialization of Labor*, pp. 343–344.

48 Luxemburg: *National Assembly*.

emancipate themselves from domination and exert control over the state.

### From Bourgeois Democracy to a Republic of Councils

Luxemburg's materialist approach to politics made her understand that revolution, the political action that is at the origin of a free constitution, is conditioned by the current stage of class struggle and the legal and extra-legal means available to the masses. Political action, the »deed,« is the starting point of the revolution, and the factors conditioning these actions become a constitutive part of it. Being a materialist and realist thinker, Luxemburg envisioned a period of transition between the capitalist and socialist societies, a *de facto* regime in which both bourgeois and proletarian institutions would coexist. This transitional phase would originate in the establishment of councils.

»[...] we can predict with certainty that in whatever country, after Germany, the proletarian revolution may next break out, the first step will be the formation of workers' and soldiers' councils. Precisely here lies the bond that unites our movement internationally. This is the slogan which completely distinguishes our revolution from all earlier bourgeois revolutions.«<sup>49</sup>

Even if she did not propose a proper constitutional structure for this transition period, her material legal thought reveals two basic elements that the revolutionary constitution must have in order to enable the path to socialism: 1) democratic rights to free speech, assembly, and suffrage to ensure the conquest of representative structures, and 2) local, autonomous working-class councils as constitutive institutions of the new socialist society. As I discussed above, democratic rights need

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49 Luxemburg: Our Program, p. 366.

not only to be formally respected but also equally exercised, which would require the socialization of burdens preventing proletarians from engaging in political action. In the case of proletarian women, for example, the socialization of child-care and domestic labor would be a necessary condition for their equal access to politics.

According to Luxemburg, what makes the proletarian revolution radically distinct from bourgeois revolutions is the spontaneous organizing of the masses in councils, »the stamp of a proletarian socialist revolution.«<sup>50</sup> Even if she does not mention the exercise of constituent power in this spontaneous self-constitution of the councils, this is the power workers and soldiers are actually wielding when defying the existing structures of power and setting up their own autonomous political institutions of self-rule. Consequently, the establishment of local worker councils marks the origin of a constituent revolution »from below,« and therefore its fate is tied to the strength of the council system, which is supposed to replace the bourgeois ruling structure in the long run.

This transitional phase in which the new proletarian institution is added to the existing political structure corresponds to the type of ›composite‹ constitutionalism endorsed by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527).<sup>51</sup> From a realist perspective, Machiavelli's model does not seek to directly abolish oligarchic structures of power – since this would be too difficult when oligarchy is powerful – but to add new autonomous institutions resting on plebeian authority rather than on existing legality. Therefore, the mere existence of an institutional source of proletarian authority, even if not properly constitutionalized, would imply the recognition of organized proletarians as po-

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> For an analysis of Machiavelli's constitutional theory see Gabriele Pedullà: Machiavelli in Tumult. The Discourses on Livy and the Origins of Political Conflictualism, New York 2019; Camila Vergara: Systemic Corruption. Constitutional Ideas for an Anti-Oligarchic Republic, New York 2020, pp. 125–143.

litical agents and begin to establish the institutionalization of class conflict. The continual agonistic opposition of the councils to the representative structure appears, moreover, as the effective cause of the revolution in this transition period, which would only be completed when proletarian institutions acquire supreme authority and decision-making power and a new legality expresses a socialist society rather than a capitalist one.

It is this transitional period, in which class conflict is incited by the organs of the people against oligarchy, that for Luxemburg is the dictatorship of the proletariat, a strong democratic, worker-run dictatorial power able to push back, demand, and dismantle the oligarchic structure. For Luxemburg there is no opposition between dictatorship and democracy in the case of the dictatorship of the proletariat, because it

»consists in the *manner of applying democracy*, not in its *elimination*, but in energetic, resolute attacks upon the well-entrenched rights and economic relationships of bourgeois society, without which a socialist transformation cannot be accomplished. But this dictatorship must be the work of the *class* and not of a little leading minority in the name of the class – that is, it must proceed step by step out of the active participation of the masses; it must be under their direct influence, subjected to the control of complete public activity; it must arise out of the growing political training of the mass of the people.«<sup>52</sup>

The dictatorship of the proletariat is the application of democracy, the imposition of decisions made by the assembled people, against oligarchic power. Democratic dictatorial power has the specific task of attacking the privileges of the few and the economic relations in which these privileges are enmeshed in order to dismantle the bourgeois legal infrastructure to make room for the new socialist society

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52 Luxemburg: *The Russian Revolution*, p. 308.

to arise. According to Luxemburg, a truly emancipatory dictatorship cannot be led by a group of revolutionaries who speak for the people but must proceed »out of the active participation of the masses« and be »under their direct influence« and »control.« Anything less than the ultimate control of workers' councils over the state is not a dictatorship of the proletariat but merely a dictatorial government of the few *in the name of* the people but not really *subject to* the people. Moreover, if the masses do not control the dictatorial powers, and a »little leading minority« is in charge, these powers would be exerted over the people from the top – which for Luxemburg is not very different from non-socialist dictatorships.

Even if the dictatorship of the proletariat – the transition regime in which workers' councils establish themselves as an effective counter-power to oligarchy – is democratic and, therefore, has popular authority to demand structural changes from government, it is an illusion to think this democratic authority, codified into law, would ultimately be respected by the oligarchy. To believe in a peaceful transfer of power is for Luxemburg to be beholden to a lack of realism because it is

»sheer insanity to believe that capitalists would goodhumoredly obey the socialist verdict of a parliament or of a national assembly, that they would calmly renounce property, profit, the right to exploit. All ruling classes fought to the end, with tenacious energy, to preserve their privileges.«<sup>53</sup>

Even if representative government is somehow controlled by the working classes and revolutionary reforms were passed, this in no way guarantees they will be enforced or respected. The only way to resist the pushback of the rich and powerful and be ready for a protracted period of conflict in which legal and illegal sabotage and even open violence are to be expected is that the power of workers is properly

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53 Luxemburg: Spartacus League, p. 352.

organized, becoming an autonomous source of democratic authority able to exceed legality and impose anti-oligarchic laws. In addition to abolishing the formal and material privileges of the oligarchic class, laws coming out of workers' councils would aim at radically emancipating the common people from the domination of the few, a form of revolutionary reform that subverts the predominant structure of class domination. Given the aim of upending structural oppression, democratic authority is bound to be violated by the powerful few who are likely to employ any means necessary to preserve their privileges.

Because proletarian law can only come out of the councils, through class consciousness and the performance of emancipatory politics, the legal subversion of the system is grounded on material conditions, backed up by the collective power of the organized masses. This is why, when proletarian law finally arises out of the workers' councils to challenge the economic system, and the capitalist class reacts, a civil war between the ruling forces and the organized masses will inevitably ensue. For Luxemburg, a peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism is impossible, not because the working class would need to take governmental power by force (elections had already placed the SPD in a government coalition), but because of the violent response of the ruling class to proletarian, anti-capitalist law. Barbarism thus comes from the counterrevolution, from the pushback of the ruling class to the radical social change initiated in the workers' councils.

Red Rosa – as her antagonists called her – did not advocate for violence; Luxemburg recognized the inevitability of bloodshed and the need to plan for it. For her, »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.«<sup>54</sup> However, while proletarian violence against individual oligarchs is unlikely, oligarchic violence is to be expected because institutions are what preserves individuals' power, and therefore workers' and soldiers'

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54 Ibid.

councils need to be prepared to resist and combat the violence that will inevitably fall upon them.

### Lessons for Revolutionary Politics in Times of Crisis

Even if more than a century separates our current conjuncture from the revolutionary times in which Rosa Luxemburg lived, her lucid analysis of a representative democracy in crisis and her realist strategy to achieve social change and the emancipation of the working classes are as relevant today as they were in the early 20th century. While she witnessed the birth of mass politics and the battle for the inclusion of the proletariat in the political system at a time of rising totalitarianism, today we are in the midst of a crisis of democracy that has exposed the dominance and brutality of oligarchic power despite decades of universal suffrage. The veil of liberal equality, pierced by material deprivation, discrimination, and police repression, has prompted common people to rise up against structural oppression at a time of rising ethnonationalism.

The cycle of protest that began after the 2008 financial crisis – from Occupy Wall Street in New York, the *indignados* movement in Spain, the *gilets jaunes* and the *gilets noir* in France, and the popular uprising against the neoliberal state in Chile, to the protests against police brutality in Minneapolis and beyond – has shared headlines with the emergence of new nationalist, anti-immigration parties – such as the Sweden Democrats, a party with neo-Nazi roots that entered the Swedish parliament in 2010 with a platform against multiculturalism and immigration, and AfD, the far-right nationalist party that in 2017 became the third-largest party in Germany – as well as with the resurgence and rebranding of more traditional nationalist parties and politics, such as the *Rassemblement national* (former *Front National*) in France and Donald Trump's revamping of white nationalism within the Republican Party in the US. Once again, the politics of the oppressed is bound to clash with ethnonationalist politics at a moment

in which the foundations of the political system are eroding, opening the possibility of a rupture within the capitalist system, conducive to the emancipation of the plebeian masses.

The current crisis of democracy has evidenced the superfluousness of electoral procedures that render political representation as little more than a mere expression of oligarchic power – despite the insurgent representatives of the working classes embracing democratic socialism such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders in the US, who sponsor anti-oligarchic measures to limit the power of the super rich, workers' control over companies, and a vague promise of democratizing political power. Luxemburg's insights into revolutionary politics allow us to escape the elitist logic of the representative system – which has consistently favored the powerful few to the detriment of the common people – by bringing to the forefront the fundamental task of establishing organs of the people as autonomous sources of popular authority and power. Even if conquering the state through the ballot box is necessary to bring about a new society based on socialist rather than capitalist principles, for Luxemburg there is no real emancipation of the working classes without the political action of workers in local councils. Moreover, the central task of the revolutionary party is to foster and expand the council system and democracy from below – not to impose a top-down socialist blueprint designed by a handful of party leaders. Autonomous popular power is needed not only to fight the capitalist oligarchy but also the inevitable oligarchic tendencies growing inside the revolutionary party.

Because the duty of the revolutionary is for Luxemburg to enable the people to speak for themselves and not to speak for the people, she left traditional party politics to establish the Spartacus League and advocate for a republic of councils and engage in direct action to force the government to establish it. For Luxemburg, council democracy, as the power and authority emanating from the organized working masses, autonomous from the state and the revolutionary party, is not a transitory scheme of power but a constitutive organ of revolution-

ary politics and the cornerstone of a socialist society. Even if in the 21st century we are still lacking intellectual figures as passionate and influential as Rosa Luxemburg, the lessons contained in her work are fertile ground from which to think about how to achieve a free and just society from the seemingly inescapable logics of capitalism and its oligarchic structures of power. A revolution able to achieve liberty for the oppressed needs to come from below and be controlled by the organized masses. Therefore, critical thinkers and activists should follow Luxemburg's lead and place their efforts on the fundamental objective of establishing, in theory and practice, a popular infrastructure of local assemblies through which the spark of revolutionary politics could ignite enduring radical change.

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