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Socialist democracy: Rosa Luxemburg's challenge to democratic theory

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Abstract

Contemporary democratic theorists have tended to assume that democracy is compatible with and even requires a capitalist economic system. Rosa Luxemburg offers a democratic criticism of this view, arguing that the dominating effects of a capitalist economy undermine the ability of liberal democracy to actualise its ideals of freedom and equality. Drawing on Luxemburg's writings, this article theorises a model of socialist democracy which combines support for public ownership and control of the means of production with a plural multi-party electoral system and a defence of civil liberties. It recovers Luxemburg's conceptualisation of a socialist democracy as the extension of democratic principles to major social and economic institutions currently governed by nondemocratic authority structures. It defends this version of socialist democracy from the liberal objection that it violates citizens' property rights and the Marxist objection that it retains the dominating structures of the state and a coercive legal system.

Keywords

socialism, democracy, Rosa Luxemburg, democratic theory, political institutions

Since the end of the Cold War, mainstream democratic theory has been premised on a widespread consensus around the legitimacy and desirability of liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1989, 23). Different models of democracy (minimalist, aggregative, participatory, deliberative) all share a common set of presumptions about the limits of political institutions and the background economic conditions of a market economy (Held, 2007, 231). Recent work on democratic innovations and new institutional designs such as mini-publics and citizens' assemblies only reinforces the underlying agreement on

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the broad suitability of liberal representative democracy to modern governance problems (Fung, 2012, 610; Smith, 2010, 1). Authors tend to presuppose that different innovations will supplement rather than replace liberal democratic institutions. In both the field of democratic theory and the comparative and empirical study of democracy, a liberal capitalist system is presupposed with a focus mainly on political institutions, electoral procedures and political parties.

To cast new light on this subject, this article draws on a figure that has yet to receive significant critical attention within democratic theory: the revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg. Luxemburg's writings make an important contribution by contesting this general consensus and arguing that liberal capitalist democracy is in fact an unstable and contradictory institutional configuration that remains structurally unable to fully realize its foundational principles of freedom and equality. While the democratic bent of her writings is widely acknowledged and her work has been thoroughly debated within the socialist literature (Schulman, 2013), her contribution to our understanding of the conditions of democracy is yet to be properly integrated within democratic theory (O'Kane, 2015; Cotta, 2019). For Luxemburg, democracy was both a necessary precondition for working-class organizing and a desirable good in itself considered as a political form that provided formal political equality and civil liberties. She understood the workers' movement as continuing the 19th century democratic republican legacy of a struggle for greater liberties, the extension of the franchise and the fight against social inequalities (Bonnell, 1996; Bevir, 2000). At the same time, she gave trenchant criticisms of the limitations of liberal democracy and considered that further social transformation would be necessary to achieve the goal of a socialist society.

Drawing on Luxemburg's writings, this article theorizes a model of socialist democracy which combines support for public ownership and control of the means of production with a plural multi-party electoral system and a defence of civil liberties. It recovers Luxemburg's conceptualization of a socialist democracy as the extension of democratic principles to major social and economic institutions currently governed by nondemocratic authority structures. The article re-interprets certain aspects of Rosa Luxemburg's thought in light of contemporary circumstances, which leads to a significant departure from traditional interpretations of her political thought. This conception of a more robust institutional dimension of socialist democratic political thought assists in responding to liberal concerns about the violation of civil rights and the growth of a bureaucratic and totalitarian society. It argues that socialism is best conceived today as a form of broadening the spheres of social life which democratic principles should govern rather than a leap into a post-democratic beyond. It can be differentiated from traditional communist ideas of a proletarian democracy abolishing itself or withering away to be replaced by a stateless society of voluntary associations and convivial social relations.

This institutionalist reading of Luxemburg's political thought may strike some as odd given the institutional dimensions of her writings are consciously underdeveloped. She did not see the role of a theorist to prescribe a particular set of institutions or to develop abstract principles by which they should be governed. Indeed, she was critical of attempts to legislate socialism from above and to identify the realization of freedom with any particular institutional arrangement (Luban, 2019). For her, socialism was a process of the

self-emancipation of the working-class and it was only through political experience that the contours of a democratic socialist society could be worked out in practice. In spite of these interpretive barriers, this article argues that Luxemburg's writings offer a more pluralist understanding of how the institutions of socialism could be developed with a specific emphasis on citizens' active participation in public life, respect for minority groups and institutionalized spaces for disagreement and contestation.

Luxemburg was writing at a particular historical period when the workers' movement was strong and a socialist revolution seemed imminent. Today, unions are waning and capitalism has re-organized the labour process into even more precarious forms of gig work, zero hour contracts and outsourced labour. There is a general sense that capitalism is more resilient and malleable than socialists of Luxemburg's era thought possible. But in spite of these changes, there is nevertheless still much that is relevant in Luxemburg's conception of socialism as the spread of democratic principles throughout society. Workplaces would still benefit from instituting forms of workers' control, even if many have moved further than ever before from achieving this. Luxemburg's thought speaks to us today because it holds open the possibility of a post-capitalist horizon while at the same time conceptualizing how this could be achieved through a democratic movement. Luxemburg's revolutionary socialist democracy is a distinctive contribution to democratic theory, which has since its inception neglected economic considerations from its primary sphere of analysis.

Democratic theory and the economy

For most of the history of what we now retrospectively call 'democratic theory', it was understood that democracy should be conceptualized as in an integral relationship with the economy. The origins of democracy as a movement and institutional arrangement were based on an impulse by the many to redress social and economic inequalities through the exercise of political power (Wolin, 2016; Ober, 1996; Ober, 2008). The democratic challenge to oligarchy arose due to the pervasive disparities in wealth and power that benefited traditional elites and allowed them to dominate society. John Stuart Mill considered that the spread of democracy and the enfranchisement of the working-class would likely lead to a future of worker-owned and managed businesses and some form of socialist or market socialist economy (Mill, 1970; Stafford, 1998; McCabe, 2021). In the early 20th century, there was an influential movement in Europe and the United States for 'industrial democracy' and 'proletarian democracy' promoted by progressive intellectuals and sections of the workers' movement, particularly during the 1910s and the revolutionary period of 1917–1923 (Croly, 2010; Poole, 1982; Ness and Azzellini, 2011). John Dewey believed that the democratic ideal could not be properly realized so long as 'industrial and economic autocracy' persisted, perceiving the need for democracy to direct economic relations (Dewey, 1939, 314). Even Joseph Schumpeter – originator of the elite conception of democracy – argued the democratization of labour relations would eventually transform liberal capitalist societies into socialist ones (Schumpeter, 1942, 697; Medearis, 1997, 821).

Yet mainstream democratic theory of the past 40 years has tended to elide economic considerations, focusing instead on political institutions and different models of liberal democracy (Held, 2007; Dahl, 1998). The emerging consensus in American political science departments in the 1960s was that although there were tensions between democracy and capitalism, some form of market economy was an important requisite for democratic government. Robert Dahl (1998) observed that democracy had historically only persisted for significant periods of time in societies with market economies and that certain aspects of capitalism appeared favourable to democratic institutions and forms of life. Democratic theorists accepted Friedrich Hayek's argument that there were epistemic limitations on the possibility of centralized economic planning due to the dispersal of local knowledge embodied in individual economic agents that could not be grasped and calculated by a single planning agency (Hayek, 1944). The collapse of the bureaucratic state socialist experiments of the 20th century seemed to confirm Hayek's criticism and demonstrate that liberal democratic capitalism constituted the feasible limits of viable democratic systems (Held, 1995). Economic inequalities were seen as something that could undermine democracy, but for the most part the economy was considered as a black box separate from the political sphere of democratic governance (Klein, 2020, 21).

As deliberative democracy and 'democratic innovations' began to dominate democratic theory in the 2000s, attention was focused on elucidating deliberation as a mode of democratic activity and studying the institutions and systems necessary for realizing its ideals in practice (Smith, 2010; Mansbridge and Parkinson, 2012). Much of this literature has little to say about the idea that economic relations should be democratized. This is true even of the most recent wave of 'second-order' approaches to understanding democracy exemplified by Warren (2017) and Michael Saward (2021) which attempt to step back from the first-order models of democracy to engage in broader theorizing about the 'general political practices' and 'design features' that will 'maximise a political system's democratic problem-solving capacities' (Warren, 2017, 39). Partial exceptions to this neglect include the ambitious and maximalist versions of associational democracy, which theorized ways voluntary associations could play a greater role in political and economic life in conjunction with formal public authorities (Hirst, 1994; Cohen and Rogers, 1995). The Empowered Participatory Governance programme of Fung and Wright (2003) also includes a diverse set of public experiments such as participatory budgeting, but it restricted democratic interventions into the economy to a limited set of administrative reforms.

The idea of democratizing the economy returns to a more ambitious political agenda of the early participatory democrats who were influenced by the student movements of the 1960s and theorized various forms of greater participation in the workplace and economic life (Pateman, 1970; MacPherson, 1977; Barber, 1984). Carole Pateman recovered a tradition of participatory democracy – drawing from John Stuart Mill, Jean Jacques Rousseau and G. D. H. Cole – to propose a vision of a "participatory society" consisting of further democratizing the state but also of extending forms of citizen participation in decision making to other authority structures within society. Pateman underlined the importance of democracy in the workplace because it was a primary site of socialization and an institution in which individuals spent most of their lives. However, the emphasis of

the theory was on the instrumental and pedagogical value of participation as a means of promoting an active citizenry and a thriving democratic culture (Pateman, 1970, 42). It rests on empirical claims about a positive 'spillover effect' of workplace democracy enhancing individuals' civic virtues and democratic skills (O'Neill, 2008).

Political philosophers have recently returned to the question of workplace democracy and have argued that investor-owned companies remain oligarchic and undemocratic organizations (Anderson, 2017; Frega, Herzog and Neuhäuser, 2019).[1] Workplace democrats argue that those in managerial roles should be appointed by and accountable to workers. Landemore and Ferreras (2016) advocate for democratic reforms to the workplace through an analogy between the firm and the state, renewing Robert Dahl's argument that 'if democracy is justified in governing the state, then it is also justified in governing economic enterprises' (Dahl, 1985, 134–135). Philosophers from a neo-republican and relational egalitarian perspective have argued that employees are at risk of being subjected to the arbitrary will of their bosses, which violates the principle of individuals maintaining egalitarian relationships with one another (González-Ricoy, 2014; Breen, 2015; Anderson, 2017). However, workplace democrats focus on the micro-level of the firm without adequately addressing macro-level concerns about the effects of a concentration of power due to private control over investment decisions and worker participation in a capitalist labour market. Private control over the distribution of scarce resources in the economic domain should be considered as undemocratic at the level of finance and investment as at the level of an individual firm (Vrousalis, 2019).

The project of socialist democracy argues for public ownership and control over the economy and for the democratization of broader spheres of social life.[2] Socialist democrats seek to intervene at the level of the workplace, but also to institute forms of democratic control over broader economic processes such as investment and finance. It contains an idea of 'economic democracy', a term which became more common in the 1980s, although it was used inconsistently and sometimes referred to forms of worker-controlled workplaces (Dahl, 1985; Ellerman, 1992) rather than the broader democratization of the economy as a whole (Smith, 2000; Schweickart, 1996; Malleson, 2014).

Beyond the confines of democratic theory, socialist democracy shares many commonalities with socialist republicans, who also advocate public ownership and control of the means of production, but do so to achieve the republican goal of non-domination (Thompson, 2019; O'Shea, 2019; Muldoon, 2022). In addition to these points of intersection, socialist democracy has the added benefit of being less tied to the questionable reactionary and anti-democratic legacy of republican political thought (McCormick, 2003; Ramgotra, 2014). Republicanism has been traditionally tied to a militaristic and masculine model of the sturdy man of honour who bears arms. Contemporary republicans distance themselves from such connotations, but turning to a different socialist democratic tradition opens the possibility of another way of arguing for similar practices and outcomes that do not come with the darker resonances of the older republican tradition (Goodin, 2003). As we will see, it is also more explicit about the extension of democratic principles to broader spheres of society. Rather than focusing on the sphere of the state, socialist democracy as conceptualized here refers explicitly to a broader range of

institutions such as the workplace, school, economic regulatory institutions and cultural centres.

Rosa Luxemburg's democratic critique of liberal democracy

We find in Rosa Luxemburg's writings a distinctive argument for the limitations of liberal democracy and the historical contingency of the relationship between democracy and capitalism. It is drawn from Marx and resonates with a number of other socialist democratic writers from her era in the European mass socialist parties, but the precise articulation of the role of democracy in socialism was never made as clearly as in Luxemburg's writings. The basis of Luxemburg's critique is the charge of a democratic deficit within liberal democratic regimes insofar as they seek to restrict the application of democratic principles and forms of life to a narrow political sphere of government and the political state. Following Marx, Luxemburg argued that the political equality granted to formally equal citizens had to be considered in relation to their life as producers and the compulsion they faced in the economic sphere to sell their labour to the capitalist class. She demanded that the idea of equal participation in decision making should be applied to all major social institutions, particularly in workplaces and the sphere of production. It was only in the further democratization of society and the economy that democratic citizens could exercise control over key social institutions that had been monopolized by capitalists.

Luxemburg conceptualized this aspect of political transformation based on her analysis of the limitations and inadequacies of 'bourgeois democracy' (Luxemburg, 2007). This concept referred roughly to what we would now call 'liberal democracy', a term which was popularized during the 1940s and 1950s to identify a diverse range of parliamentary systems in opposition to fascist and communist regimes in Italy, Germany and the Soviet Union, which also claimed to be various forms of democracy (Bell, 2014). For Luxemburg, bourgeois democracies combined representative government with a capitalist economic system. They guaranteed citizens equal political rights in the public sphere (rights such as citizenship, suffrage, freedom of speech and association), while enforcing systems of property rights and social hierarchies that maintain vast inequalities in the private sphere.

Luxemburg followed Marx in challenging the formal separation of 'the political' and the 'the economic' in capitalist societies (Wood, 2010). For Luxemburg, the economy was not a natural realm of free exchange, but one determined by a social relationship between two unequal classes which supported the social power of capitalists to control and organize labour. By maintaining a separate economic sphere with its own system of private property and wage labour, forms of coercion and domination could be maintained alongside formal equality in the political sphere. The distinguishing feature of capitalism was that it did not need to rely on political or juridical forms of expropriation and domination; the system of wage labour supported class domination through the economic relation between workers and capitalists.

Luxemburg argued that in a capitalist economy, the control over decisions of private investment granted a significant degree of public power to capitalists. As a result, the

power of any democratic government would necessarily be curtailed by the public power of capitalists. Formally equal citizens may vote for their officials and governments may pursue mandates of regulating businesses, but regardless of the ideology or popularity of a political party in power, the government will be structurally constrained by the power of capital, which it must respect and protect (Luxemburg, 2007, 59; Przeworski, and Wallerstein, 1988). Democratic elections may give the appearance of representatives governing in the interests of all of society, but in reality capitalist interests would predominate. She used the term 'parliamentarism' to describe this contradiction when democratic processes functioned alongside capitalist forms of domination in the economic domain (Luxemburg, 2007, 64–65).

This criticism can be understood through the lens of a democratic critique of liberal democracy as unable to realize what Mark Warren (2017, 43–45) has argued are the three broad functions of a democratic system: empowered inclusion, collective agenda and will formation and collective decision making. The confinement of democratic institutions and norms to a narrow political sphere and the exclusion of economic and social institutions means these democratic functions do not operate in key areas of citizens' lives.

First, liberal democracies do not adequately institutionalize the principle of empowered inclusion because workers are excluded from decisions that affect them regarding their workplaces and the investment and allocation of society's resources. The core democratic value of *political equality* is insufficient because citizens have valid claims to be included in meaningful ways – to have equal rights to initiate, speak and vote – in other functional domains of society.

Second, collective agenda and will formation is similarly limited because of the lack of institutionalized space for ordinary citizens to engage in deliberation, argument and forming judgments about political and economic issues. Aside from voting in elections, citizens are largely passive, with political activity undertaken by a group of elites in parliamentary institutions and in boardrooms.

Third, as a result of their lack of empowered inclusion and rights of participation, democratic collectives have no capacity to impose binding decisions over major social institutions. Workers could protest and resist decisions of the government and their bosses but had no right to make decisions themselves that could be enforced to organize and control their workplaces. Luxemburg considered that liberal democracies failed to empower the majority of ordinary citizens as collective political agents, which we can interpret as failing to adequately realize democratic principles properly understood and applied.

She also refused to see capitalism and democracy as inherently connected in their historical development. Seeking to disentangle the two systems, she wanted to show that their fates were not tied together so she could make room for a non-capitalist conception of democratic life. She revealed the historically contingent nature of late-19th century democratic capitalist societies in Western Europe and argued that different forms of democracy had existed alongside other economic orders in ancient and Medieval societies (Luxemburg, 2007, 85). She also argued that the property-owning classes were only supportive of limited forms of democratic government to the extent that they served their economic interests. In Germany, universal male suffrage was not a product of

campaigning by progressive liberal reformers but an instrument to fuse the smaller German states, which overcame the limitations of semi-feudal political arrangements. Luxemburg warned that the propertied classes' support for democracy was always limited to whether it continued to support their economic interests. When democratic processes threatened the bourgeoisie's social power, their preference was to turn to more authoritarian forms of government rather than to defend democratic principles.

In her arguments with the reformist wing of her party in the late 1890s, Luxemburg sought to reappropriate democracy as an emancipatory force that would play a valuable role in the transition to socialism. For Luxemburg (2007, 88), '[w]e must conclude that the socialist movement is not bound to bourgeois democracy but that, on the contrary, the fate of democracy is bound up with the socialist movement'. She rejected the claim that democracy could be considered in opposition to the ultimate goal of a socialist revolution or that the spread of democracy was an inevitable social force that made the socialist demands of the workers' movement irrelevant.

The political institutions of democracy were important for both instrumental and intrinsic reasons. They were instrumentally important because universal suffrage, civil liberties and a limited degree of self-government secured the pre-conditions for working-class struggle. The freedom to assemble, to organize and to legally join political parties allowed socialists to build mass movements and contest political power. By participating in elections and understanding the limits of bourgeois democracy, workers would become more aware of their class interest and the possibilities of a more just and egalitarian economic order (Luxemburg, 2007, 93).

Luxemburg also considered that the political institutions of democracy were valuable in themselves, not merely as a transitional arrangement or as a means for worker organizing. Luxemburg (2004a, 302) championed universal suffrage, multi-party elections, civic freedoms and representative government as integral to public life. At first sight, her support for these various institutions may be difficult to square with her criticisms of parliamentary politics. However, we can differentiate her critique of 'parliamentarism' from her more general support for representative political institutions in which the citizens could exercise political power through their representatives. In *Reform or Revolution*, Luxemburg (2007, 92–93) makes clear that her criticism of the former was specifically of the role of parliament in a capitalist economy in which the military, landowners and the executive branch of the government were the true sources of power.

In sum, Luxemburg's critique of bourgeois democracy concerns how the underlying principles of democracy are implemented in a narrow and limited manner, resulting in contradictions due to the persistence of undemocratic forms of social organization. She develops a *democratic* critique of liberal democracy based on the idea that it could never live up to its promise of providing freedom and equality due to the preservation of relationships of domination and exploitation. She insisted that a more complete picture of democracy could only emerge through revealing 'the hard kernel of social inequality and lack of freedom hidden under the sweet shell of formal equality and freedom' in actually existing liberal democracies (Luxemburg, 2004a, 308).

Socialism and the expansion of democracy

Like many socialists of her era, Luxemburg followed Marx in avoiding systematic speculation on a post-capitalist society. She considered that the task of building socialism was for the workers themselves and that creating hypothetical blueprints of the future was a futile and pointless exercise. As a result, much of Luxemburg's writing is directed towards understanding and criticizing capitalist society. In her earlier writings such as *Introduction to Political Economy* (Luxemburg, 2014) and *The Accumulation of Capital* (Luxemburg, 1951), when socialism is defined, it is figured primarily as the abolition of private property and a transition from a capitalist to a socialist production process consisting of the creation of a planned economy and the social ownership of productive assets. By this she meant that production would be planned by a central democratic committee in a rational manner to meet human needs rather than leaving decisions about the investment of capital in private hands leading to the 'anarchy of the market'. She wrote that in capitalism there is 'the disappearance of any kind of authority in economic life, any organization and planning in labour, any kind of connection between the individual members' (Luxemburg, 2014, 134). Like other members of the Second International, the key difference between the two systems was in the socialist emphasis on rational and democratic economic planning.

The Russian Revolution and the spread of revolutionary activity throughout Europe led to a greater need for the further specification of the society socialists hoped to create. In response to the evolving political situation, from 1917 onwards, Luxemburg developed a more expansive conception of the norms and institutions that would be required for a transition to a socialist society. She went further than the simple equation of capitalism with anarchy and socialism with a planned economy to discuss how socialism required "the fundamental transformation of the entire economic relations" (Luxemburg, 2004b, 346).

For Luxemburg, socialist democracy was best conceived not as the abolition or transcendence of democracy, but as the extension of democratic principles of organization throughout society to major social institutions currently governed by nondemocratic authority structures. Of all the socialist theorists of her era who supported mass socialist parties, Luxemburg was the most strident about the democratic nature of the goals of socialism. There are similarities between her position and Karl Kautsky's support for the twin goals of democracy and socialism, but even here Luxemburg articulated more explicit formulations regarding the democratisation of social institutions and the need for a vibrant public sphere and engaged citizenry.

She was critical of the Bolsheviks for dismissing bourgeois democracy as a sham that could be discarded in the pursuit of a socialist society. Luxemburg (2004a, 308) criticized Trotsky's remarks about refusing to be 'idol worshippers of formal democracy'. She considered the project of creating a socialist democracy to consist of a move 'to replace bourgeois democracy – not to eliminate democracy altogether' (Luxemburg, 2004a, 308). Democracy itself would not be overcome or transcended through some 'higher type' of institutions that were superior to the universal suffrage of a constituent assembly (Lenin, 1993). Luxemburg's concept of a socialist democracy was predicated on the 'the active

participation of the masses' extending democratic principles from the political sphere to create the conditions for a participatory society (Luxemburg, 2004a).

The positive project of building socialism required not simply a decree of the abolition of private property, but more thoroughgoing changes at the level of individual factories, workshops and other points of production. She wrote that transforming productive assets into 'the common property of the people' was only 'the first duty of a workers' government', following which, 'the real and most difficult task begin: the reconstruction of the economy on a completely new basis' (Luxemburg, 2004b, 346). There are three major elements to this shift that are worth emphasizing: the extension of democratic principles to nondemocratic authority structures; the transformation of labour and the cultural shift in everyday practices and mentalities that Luxemburg thought must accompany these institutional changes to make a socialist democracy possible.

The first relates to how the democratization process could be extended beyond the narrow confines of the state. Luxemburg agreed with Marx that the political revolutions of the 18th century were only partially complete. The movement to democratize the state was most successful in achieving executive and legislative authorities based on elections organized around political parties and universal suffrage. However, this democratic movement achieved far less in other important social institutions in which large differences in power and influence between individuals remained firmly entrenched. She argued that many institutions required further transformation including corporations, economic regulatory institutions, schools, universities, the media, cultural institutions, the civil service and political parties. Immediate demands issued by the Spartacus League during the German Revolution also mention the army, 'the food, housing, health and educational systems', 'municipal councils', 'the police force', 'all banks, mines, smelters, together with all large enterprises of industry and commerce' and 'the entire public transportation system' (Luxemburg, 2004c, 353–355). Two more specific examples that Luxemburg mentions in her article 'The Socialisation of Society' are large enterprises in industry and agriculture. She does not see it as important for small-scale farming and craftsmen to be included in the initial processes of socialization because their economic holdings are not as essential to the organization of society and she considered that in time 'they will all come to us voluntarily and will recognise the merits of socialism as against private property' (Luxemburg, 2004b, 347).

Luxemburg recognized that a socialist society required a more thoroughgoing process of transformation beyond top-down nationalization efforts and the rational determination of the economy. Central to her conception were institutions that played a major role in sustaining and reproducing 'public life'. Just as the implementation of democratic norms in the political sphere granted them legitimacy, for Luxemburg 'the same thing applies to economic and social life also" (Luxemburg, 2004a, 306). In each of these above-mentioned social institutions, "the whole mass of the people must take part in it'. It was imperative for Luxemburg that the process of democratizing authority structures be a pathway for citizens to play a more active role in a self-determining society. She envisioned socialism as enabling individuals to overcome the alienation of capitalist society and to reassert their authority over social institutions through public control and participation.

Luxemburg also argued that the introduction of workplace democracy at the level of the individual firm would change the way the labour process would be organized. If the threat of poverty and destitution were removed and people worked for the public good, '"work itself must be organised quite differently" than in capitalism, where 'one only goes to work because one has to, because … [it is] the means to live' (Luxemburg, 2004b, 347). She described how in a socialist society,

> "the factories, works and the agricultural enterprises must be reorganised according to a new way of looking at things. … In a socialist society, where everyone works together for their own well being, the health of the workforce and its enthusiasm for work must be given the greatest consideration at work. Short working hours that do not exceed the normal capability, healthy workrooms, all methods of recuperation and a variety of work must be introduced in order that everyone enjoys doing their part" (Luxemburg, 2004b, 346–348).

Work should also be organized in ways that enable individuals to learn and grow as part of their job and use their initiative to complete tasks. Some degree of technical managers would still be required, but these would be subordinated to the democratic demand for equal participation in important decision making. As part of this change in how work would be organized, workers required a new sense of self-organization and discipline to replace the compulsion of work under capitalism. For Luxemburg (2004b, 348) this called for 'inner self-discipline, intellectual maturity, moral ardour, a sense of dignity and responsibility, a complete inner rebirth of the proletarian'.

Finally, Luxemburg was attentive to the broader cultural transformations that would be required to institute new forms of life beyond a change in economic institutional structures. She considered that a socialist society would require a shift in the egoism and competition which predominated in capitalist culture towards an ethos of solidarity and public spiritedness. For Luxemburg (2004a, 306), '[s]ocialism in life demands a complete spiritual transformation in the masses degraded by centuries of bourgeois rule. Social instincts in place of egotistical ones, mass initiative in place of inertia, idealism which conquers all suffering'. In her later writings, Luxemburg emphasized the need for a widespread change in people's established patterns of behaviour to ensure that economic changes were supported by new social norms. Revolutionary transformation involved a new set of moral principles that could accompany the institutional changes to the mode of production.

While the first two points bear some resemblance to other socialist writers of her time, this last point stands out as distinctively Luxemburgian. She believed that the emancipation of the working-class would require their mental and spiritual development. Anton Pannekoek (2003) makes similar points about the need for spiritual growth, but Luxemburg insisted that the revolutionary transformation of society must proceed in a manner that aligned with the future goals of socialism. The workers would need to embody the principles of socialism in their actions as they went about transforming society so that a socialist society could emerge through the conscious support of a majority of workers and be constructed through their common efforts. She thought that 'socialism will not and cannot be created by any government, however socialistic. Socialism must be created by

the masses, by every proletarian. Only that is socialism, and only thus can socialism be created' (Luxemburg (2004b, 368).

The institutions of a socialist democracy

Luxemburg's writings also offer resources for conceptualizing an institutional form of socialist democracy that is less vulnerable to standard liberal criticisms of socialist politics relating to their tendency towards dictatorship and the violation of civil rights. Communists have argued for the dissolution or withering away of the political institutions of the state to be replaced by some alternative of a 'fundamentally different type' based on the Paris Commune (Lenin, 1974, 405). Liberal critics have asserted that the absence of legal protections and democratic institutions leads to totalitarian methods of control and the necessity for the coercion of individuals and a loss of political rights. In contrast to the communist aim of the dissolution of existing democratic and legal institutions, socialist democrats argue for the importance of these institutions to provide the framework for a strong and constitutionally regulated political system with binding collective decision making.

Expanding on some of Luxemburg's underlying political principles – but in a manner which could be seen to push against some of her explicit political commitments – this article develops an institutional framework of a socialist democracy that is distinct from both liberal democracies and typical accounts of Marxist post-capitalist societies. Luxemburg's remarks on socialist political institutions are not well developed (Nye, 1994, 48), but we can recover from her writings and speeches her support for a robust institutional framework of a pluralist political system with the rule of law, multi-party elections and protections of civil liberties such as freedom of speech, assembly and association. In a socialist democracy, common ownership and control over economic institutions would be accompanied by a parliament elected via universal suffrage, civil and political rights, a free press and a coercive apparatus that could enforce collective decisions. This interpretation is in contrast to those who have claimed either that no coherent institutional politics could be developed from her writings (Luban, 2019) or that her ideal political system is some form of council republic (Vergaras, 2020).

Luxemburg's conception of a vibrant public sphere with institutionalized spaces for disagreement and difference separate her from many writers in the socialist tradition. For council socialist, Anton Pannekoek (2003, 44) says that the dismantling of capitalism ends the primary source of political conflict in society and does away with the need for a coercive apparatus 'under council organisation political democracy has disappeared, because politics itself disappeared and gave way to social economy'. For Pannekoek (2003, 44), there is no need for political and legal institutions because communist society would lead to new forms of uncoerced social interaction: 'when life and work in community are natural habit, when mankind entirely controls its own life, necessity gives way to freedom and the strict rules of justice established before dissolve into spontaneous behaviour'. Luxemburg shares Pannekoek's desire for achieving greater levels of political participation and self-government, but holds a more pluralist conception of post-capitalist society which hints at the necessity for a different set of political institutions: support for

opposition parties, respect for minorities and mobilization behind competing political programmes.

There are immediate barriers to this interpretation. For example, in 'What does the Spartacus League Want?', Luxemburg (2004c, 354) called for the 'replacement of all political organs and authorities of the former regime by delegates of the workers' and soldiers' councils'. This could lead to the conclusion that she held a preference for workers' councils over universalist democratic representative institutions. However, her critical remarks of the German National Assembly should be viewed in the context of the concrete political struggle that was occurring at the time. What Luxemburg opposed was what she saw as a strategy by the German Social Democrats to create 'a counter-revolutionary stronghold erected against the revolutionary proletariat' (Luxemburg, 1972, 287). She denounced the tactics of 'bourgeois parliamentarism' as a form of government in which 'class antagonisms and class domination are not done away with, but are, on the contrary, displayed in the open' (Luxemburg, 2007, 93). Her issue was that the SPD were actively seeking to suppress socialization and forestall the democratization of society. Luxemburg believed that in Germany at that particular moment the revolution had to be driven forward in order to secure its advances and to prevent it from descending into a counter-revolutionary movement. Her criticisms of bourgeois democracy were not targeted at political institutions such as a parliament, multi-party elections and civic liberties, but at the class domination that these institutions both enabled and concealed from view under a veneer of abstract rights. Her conception of socialist democracy should not be thought of as in substantial disagreement with these structures even though she attacks aspects of how they function within capitalist regimes.

In the case of the Russian Revolution, her criticisms of the Bolshevik dissolution of the Constituent Assembly reveal the importance she placed on universal suffrage and representative government. The Bolsheviks dissolved the Constituent Assembly under the pretext that it no longer reflected the will of the people, which they claimed had shifted significantly since the elections. Luxemburg (2004a, 301) argued that this denied '[a]ny living mental connection between the representatives, once they have been elected, and the electorate, any permanent interaction between one and the other'. The response should not have been to dissolve the Constituent Assembly in favour of party-controlled institutions, but rather to pressure representatives to reflect the current public mood. The Bolshevik's solution was worse than the problem because the abolition of democratic institutions led to less participation and an even tighter control by the party elite. The replacement of the Constituent Assembly with the purportedly higher working-class institutions of Bolshevik-dominated councils in fact restricted the progress of democratic transformation because it reduced citizen participation and control over political institutions.

For Luxemburg, the solution to the oligarchic tendencies of democratic institutions was not to abandon them, but to seek to hold them accountable through an empowered and mobilized citizenry capable of placing pressure on representatives. Responding to Trotsky's criticisms, Luxemburg (2004a, 302) contended that '"the cumbersome mechanism of democratic institutions" possesses a powerful corrective – namely, the living movement of the masses, their unending pressure'. She suggested that the strength

and vitality of a democratic institution can be measured by the degree to which citizens can influence and direct them through political pressure. In this sense, organized citizens provide a crucial counter-balance to the domination of institutions by elites and bureaucrats. As Luxemburg (2004a, 301) described, in a vibrant democracy, 'the living fluid of the popular mood continuously flows around the representative bodies, penetrates them, guides them'. She raised the question of representation not to criticize any form of political representation but to put forward evaluative criteria for how the representative nature of institutions could be judged: 'the more democratic the institutions, the livelier and stronger the pulse-beat of the political life of the masses, the more direct and complete is their influence'.

Other evidence for Luxemburg's preferred political system comes from her draft of the programme of the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, SDKPiL (Nettl, 1969, 229–33). In this programme, Luxemburg calls for the immediate goal of the establishment of a Constituent Assembly elected via universal suffrage with equality before the law and the freedoms of assembly, press and speech. Luxemburg also planned for minority groups to receive proportional representation in the Assembly and for each country to have its own Assembly with freedom to use their own language and promote their own culture and education system (O'Kane, 2015, 134). A socialist democracy, then, provides a strong institutional framework within which democratic politics can take place as well as instituting common ownership over productive assets and common forms of economic governance.

A concern with this institutionalist interpretation of Luxemburg from critics of a more councilist persuasion is that it threatens to undermine the revolutionary content of Luxemburg's positions. To clarify our position, by focusing on the constitutional aspects of Luxemburg's thought, the proposed interpretation advanced here does not seek to understate the revolutionary content behind the programme of socialist democracy. As previously stated, Luxemburg held that formal democracy would be realized as an actual democracy through the democratization and socialization of major social and economic institutions. Although this democratization and socialization must be organized and instituted within newly formed democratic organizations, not subject to party domination, it cannot be understated how radically transformed society would be through these processes. The socialist component of socialist democracy, to be properly implemented, would amount to a fundamental rupture with current capitalist social relations amounting to a complete social revolution. Although certain institutions of liberal democracy might remain in the transformed society, their context and function would be transformed by the socialization of society's material basis.

Challenges for a socialist democracy

Liberal objections. One possible objection to a socialist democracy is that instituting common ownership over productive assets would constitute a severe breach of individuals' rights to private property (Friedman, 1962; Hayek, 1944). Instead of seeking democratic control over the economy, some critics have argued that concerns over economic inequalities and unequal power over political decision making could be

alleviated either through welfare measures within a market economy, or more radically, through some form of property-owning democracy (Hsieh, 2012, 155–6; Taylor, 2014, 448). A welfare-state capitalist regime would redistribute some of the wealth inequalities created by a capitalist economy through a progressive taxation and social security scheme, whereas in a property-owning democracy background institutions would institute a range of measures to ensure that all individuals had widespread and roughly equal private ownership of capital (Rawls, 2001, 139).

The socialist democratic response to concerns about property rights is to first note that it is not personal property that is opposed, but rather the institution of private property and the unequal distribution of productive assets (Kleven, 1997). Personal property such as clothing, household goods, leisure items and personal transportation would not be subject to common ownership. Socialist democrats do not have a problem with persons having exclusive ownership over consumption goods, particularly those that are consumed in isolation. As an institution, private property does not simply grant capitalists exclusive possession over certain assets, but supports a system where those who own no capital are forced to work for capitalists to survive. As a result, Marx (1946, 125) argued that socialism 'deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is deprive him of the power to subjugate the labour of others by means of such appropriation'. Access to consumables and durable forms of personal property would actually be increased for members of the working-class who would be guaranteed a share of society's common wealth. Individual rights to personal property would occupy a prominent place in a socialist democracy as a means of conferring on individuals the right to enjoy certain goods of social life.

In relation to productive assets, a socialist democracy extends rather than eliminates property rights by constitutionally entrenching joint ownership over the means of production and guaranteeing each the right to benefit from them and consume a portion of the share of the produce (Macpherson, 1978, 205–6). Common property rights entail democratic processes of decision making over the use of the means of production. This would include finance and investment, banking, insurance, communications, transport, major industries and agriculture, among others. This shift in power over decision making in economic life would enable democratic collectives to set priorities about investment decisions. This would allow them, for example, to take measures to tackle climate change or increase spending on health and education, rather than pursuing the whims of a capitalist class (O'Shea, 2019, 560). The idea of common ownership also aims to prevent the concentration of wealth and give everyone an equal opportunity to flourish through the provision of the economic grounds to exercise their political liberty. This is based on the principle that safeguarding political liberty requires an affirmative right to the material conditions necessary for leading a full and rich life (Gould, 1988, 178–89). This includes the right to housing, work and a social dividend that could provide the means for self-development.

Welfare-state capitalism is insufficient to guarantee the exercise of such rights because many individuals are denied an equal opportunity to flourish due to the vastly unequal distribution of capital. John Rawls recognized that even with certain welfare provisions in place a capitalist economy fails to protect political liberty because it 'permits a small class

to have a near monopoly of the means of production' (Rawls, 2001, 139). In the absence of an equal distribution of capital, the private ownership of these assets has tended to give rise to relations of domination in which a privileged class use them to control the labour of those who do not. This enables the dominant class to enact a system of law and politics that ensures their hegemony in politics and throughout the economy (Edmundson, 2017, 43).

These inequalities would be greatly alleviated under a property-owning democracy in which the ownership of wealth was dispersed to prevent one section of society dominating and to provide individuals greater levels of autonomy and independence (Thomas, 2017, 146). Property-owning democracy enables a greater distribution of assets but still potentially suffers from a democratic deficit in the workplace. Private ownership means that there is no rule stipulating that workplaces should be organized democratically or that managerial roles should be appointed by the workforce. Nor is there a requirement that workers should have self-determination in how they organize matters internal to their firm. Socialist democracy provides an opportunity for a more transformative vision of the structure of workplaces and the nature of work. Without the compulsion to pursue private profit above all else, workers could change the rhythm and flow of work to potentially work less, spend more time with their families and organize their working time to maximize their health and well-being.

Property-owning democracy could include a variety of different types of workplace arrangements including worker-owned firms alongside private companies. But in the absence of a broader framework of common property and social ownership, worker-owned firms in a market economy would suffer from many of the same competitive pressures as capitalist firms which could potentially lead to degeneration into a private firm or competitive failure through under-investment (Miller, 1989, 90). Workers at such firms would have a greater say in how their workplace was organized but it would not provide any democratic rights to the citizenry more broadly who would be disenfranchised and have significantly less say over economic life. The social ownership of the means of production offers greater equality and security in guaranteeing all members of society a democratic say in how productive assets were put to use rather than just those in full-time paid employment.

Marxist objections. A second possible objection comes from Marxists arguing that a socialist democracy retains too much of the coercive apparatus of the state, which acts as an alien power over the subjugated class, mediating and suppressing class antagonisms. According to a traditional Marxist account of revolutionary transformation, the proletariat's seizure of power would be followed by a transitional period in which workers would take over the state to ensure that the rule of capital was suppressed and a socialist programme was implemented. During this transition, society would be freed from class divisions because productive property would be transferred to be held in common and regulated via a socially-determined plan. At this point, the coercive functions of the state apparatus would become superfluous because the class divisions which they previously mediated would have been eliminated. Marxists therefore argue that the state would wither away, replaced by a collection of voluntary organizations in free association,

undertaking the mere 'administration of things' by developing and implementing a social plan to meet people's needs (Engels, 1987, 284).

In response to the objection that the institutions of the state are superfluous structures of domination, we can sketch two arguments in favour of the institutionalist approach of socialist democracy. The first focuses on the necessary transformations of the state that will be undertaken, emphasizing the qualitative difference between a socialist democratic state and traditional state institutions. The second concerns the importance of maintaining juridical structures for the safeguarding of minority groups in a pluralist society.

A primary concern of the Marxist critique of coercive state power is that the institutions of the state are an oppressive force over society. Their function is to protect private property and maintain the social order in which capital rules over labour. This function leads to the state producing coercive forces that stand separated from and above the masses. It is this particular combination of function and form that allows the worst abuses of the state to occur. To address this concern, it is necessary to highlight that the function and form of any coercive aspects of a socialist democratic state would be fundamentally altered to align with the new social, economic and political order. The institutions of the state should be submitted to the will of the citizenry and enable them to have the state serve the common interest. The function of these institutions will be changed from protecting private property and surveilling the lower classes to becoming genuine wardens of the citizenry by ensuring that every person is able to access the communal wealth of society and is protected from dominating forces. Instead of a specialist force of suppression, socialist democracy could enforce its edicts through a force more like a mass citizen-militia, whose purpose was the mutual protection of each other's safety, rights to political participation, access to communal wealth and freedom from discrimination.

A second response is that a constitutional framework offers protections for potentially vulnerable groups, such as religious, racial, sexual and gender minorities and is preferable to a system of voluntary associations. It is utopian, in a pejorative sense, to imagine that the socialization and democratization of society will completely eliminate all prejudices and forms of oppression. In a system where the collective resources of society are utilized according to democratic decision making processes, these prejudices could lead to certain groups being targeted in a way in which social plans consistently underserve them or disrupt important aspects of their lives. For instance, planning decisions might be made in North America which consistently vote to build infrastructure projects through areas of significance to indigenous groups, democratically determining their dislocation via prejudicial unconcern.

In a system of free association, indigenous groups and other minorities would have little recourse to contest the democratic decisions of the voluntary organizations, except dissociation or to attempt to convince the majority to protect their interests. By instead having an institutional framework of protection, including a constitutional system safeguarding minority rights, there would be additional secure avenues through which minority groups could contest decisions that disturb their interests. This would ensure that their needs are properly accounted for within the democratically organized economic plans.

Conclusion

Drawing on Rosa Luxemburg's critique of liberal democracy and advocacy for the expansion of democracy beyond the political sphere, this article has reconstructed a concept of socialist democracy that accommodates and reconciles pluralism, civil liberties and parliaments with an economic order built on common ownership, social equality and citizen control over decision making. Through a close reading of Luxemburg's writings and speeches, we drew an important distinction between her critique of bourgeois parliamentarism and a complete opposition to representative democracy. This was achieved through a contextualization of her advocacy for transferring power to workers' and soldiers' councils based on the specific historical factors of the German Revolution and the counter-revolutionary intentions of the German Social Democrats. This distinction allowed for the reinterpretation of the democratic themes within Luxemburg's revolutionary socialism in a novel direction, one which placed greater emphasis on her advocacy for institutions that would empower the entire citizenry.

The article highlighted the ways in which socialization of the economy and democratization of its institutions would disempower the capitalist elites that dominate liberal democracies and prevent the realization of its ideals. It was shown that social ownership of the means of production would allow for inclusion, collective will formation and collective decision making to develop within the economic and social spheres, while also freeing the democratic state from the structural constraints placed upon its decision making by capital, massively expanding the range of possible decisions to be taken by citizens.

What this article has achieved is not the complete description of a socialist democracy and the form and function of all its institutions. Instead, it has aimed at a preliminary sketch of its principles and some of its possible institutions. It opens up space for further research into these areas, whilst showing the value in this pursuit by demonstrating socialist democracy's ability to take seriously the concerns of liberal democrats towards revolutionary socialism, whilst being uncompromising in its commitment to opposing the domination of political, social and economic life by capitalists.

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Notes

1. In *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls also raises questions of workplace democracy, emphasizing that they 'call for careful examination'. Rawls sees the challenge of workplace democracy as 'a major difficulty' and that the 'long-run prospects of a just constitutional regime' will depend on appropriately addressing these concerns. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) 178–179. For an argument that pushes a Rawlsian system in this direction see David Schweikart, 'Should Rawls be a Socialist? A Comparison of his Ideal Capitalism with Worker-Controlled Socialism', *Social Theory and Practice* (1978) 5, 1–27.

2. Socialist democracy as articulated here can be distinguished from Marxist-Leninist one-party state systems such as the Soviet Union (1917–1991) or Communist China under Mao Ze Dong. Socialist democracy in this article is defined as public ownership over productive assets combined with a plural and multi-party system of government.

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