

Rosa Luxemburg and the permanent evolution

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Today Rosa Luxemburg’s legacy is actual more than ever in a world in turmoil, driven by the inner contradictions of globalized capital into a global systemic breakdown. It was first manifested in the post-Lehman Brothers world capitalist crisis in 2008, which is still unresolved although more than a decade has passed. It later brought mass unemployment, social devastation, rebellions, and an escalating imperialist war drive. Then there was the gigantic qualitative leap to a new level, vastly more catastrophic: the global shock of the Covid-19 pandemic and its continuing disastrous

consequences worldwide. The danger of a universal ruin brought by capitalism, for which Rosa Luxemburg had warned, emerges again now not only with war, militarism and social disaster but also with the massive destruction of ecosystems and climate change by the capitalist profit system manifesting, in the most dramatic way, its incompatibility with the actual life process itself.

Global systemic breakdown does *not* mean the automatic collapse of capitalism. Rosa Luxemburg was wrongly accused in the past of being a supporter of a supposed “economic determinism”, where the objective contradictions inherent to capital will lead inescapably, without the struggle of a conscious subjective agency, to its automatic collapse. Important contributions by Marxist theoreticians and scholars, particularly the historic debate between Michael Löwy¹ and Norman Geras² on the famous slogan *Socialism or Barbarism*, have proven that this persistent claim was false.

Rosa fought resolutely and uncompromisingly against the linear conception of history dominant within the German and International Social Democracy against, starting from her battle with the evolutionary “socialism” of Eduard Bernstein’s revisionism, clashing many times with the economic determinism permeating the so-called “orthodox Marxism” of the Second International. Her systematic works despite weaknesses and errors, particularly in her major work *Accumulation of Capital* in 1913, never have fallen into economism. At every step, before and after the crucial threshold of the Great War, she emphasized the crucial role of class struggle, of class consciousness, of revolutionary will and proletarian revolutionary praxis against bureaucratic inertia in the German SPD, gradualism, reformism and blind faith to social progress.

The essential difference between Luxemburg’s dialectical conception of capitalist breakdown and a fatalistic view of the automatic collapse of capitalism can be seen clearly in her approach to permanent revolution, which has first been raised and theorized by Trotsky during and after the 1905 Russian Revolution, particularly when it emerged in tense debates and ideological conflicts on the strategy of the workers’ movement be-

1 Michael Löwy, “La Signification Méthodologique Du Mot D’ordre ‘Socialisme ou Barbarie’”, *Rosa Luxemburg L’étincelle incendiaire*, Les Temps des Cérises, 2018, pp. 13-30.

2 Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, Verso, 1983, passim.

tween the different factions in the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party and internationally. The "dress rehearsal" of the 1917 October Socialist Revolution.

Permanent revolution and bourgeois modernity

A point of clarification is necessary here. The theory of the Permanent Revolution is usually connected with but limited to debates on the interrelation between democratic and socialist tasks in revolutionary processes in peripheral capitalist countries. This is the most commonly encountered approach, centered on the experience of the Russian Revolution of 1905 and 1917. It is associated, in one way or another, not only or mainly in the pre-1917 divergences among Russian Marxists but above all with the struggle led by Trotsky and the Left Opposition from 1924 on-wards for the prospects of world socialist revolution against the doctrine of "Socialism in a single country" advanced by Bukharin and Stalin.

The concept of Permanent Revolution, actually, has a broader scope not limited to the periphery of capitalism, a greater methodological depth, a longer trajectory, and constant change and development *throughout bourgeois modernity*, from the times of the revolutionary ascent of the bourgeoisie to its historic decline. It is running from the early battle cry *Revolution en permanence* of radical Jacobins and Saint-Just in the French Revolution to the European Revolution of 1848 and the formulation of the perspective of Permanent Revolution in the famous 1850 "Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League" written by Karl Marx up to its re-formulation and further development in the imperialist epoch by Trotsky. It acquires its maturity precisely at the "*highest stage of capitalism*", to use Lenin's characterization of the epoch of imperialism, of capitalist decline.

The concept of Permanent Revolution is not an artificial construction. It expresses the contradiction, stressed by Marx in his *Grundrisse*, between the permanent and escalating clash between the inner tendency of capital to universality and its own internal limits, producing recurrent crises, ever more disastrous cataclysms – and revolutions:

The universality towards which it irresistibly strives encounters barriers in its own nature, which will, at a certain stage of its development, allow it to be recognized as being itself the greatest barrier to this tendency, and hence will drive towards

its own suspension.³

The *permanent* character of the revolution arises from the *incompleteness* of the historical process insofar as the inner limits of capital and capitalism itself are not abolished in the worldwide transition to Socialism.

The theory of Permanent Revolution is the conscious expression of this unconscious and yet uncompleted world-historical process in uneven and combined development.

Rosa in 1905

It is from this universal historical materialist vantage point and by studying the specific features, the original character, the dynamic of class social relations in Russia that Rosa Luxemburg had approached the 1905 Revolution and came close to the “heterodox” views of Trotsky.

Both Trotsky and Luxemburg perceived in the 1905 upheaval in Russia a literally *epoch-changing* event with vast implications on an international scale, in bourgeois society and the international workers’ movement.

Rosa Luxemburg described the last week of January 1905 as “epoch-making in the history of the international proletariat and its struggle for emancipation.”⁴

Rosa was the first Marxist in Western socialist organizations and Press who referred to the events in Russia using terms similar to Trotsky’s, and speaking about “*a revolutionary situation in permanence*”. In her historically significant article “After the First Act”, on February 4, 1905, she wrote that, after a long period of stagnation of the workers’ movement in parliamentarianism in Western Europe, “only now does the real task of Social Democracy *begin* in order to maintain the revolutionary situation in permanence.”⁵

Already in her first article on January 28, 1905, “The Revolution in Russia”, Rosa Luxemburg had recognized a turning point in world history:

3 K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook IV, Pelican, 1973, p. 410.

4 R. Luxemburg, “After the First Act”, *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record*, eds. Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido, Brill, 2009, p. 367.

5 Luxemburg, *Witnesses*, op. cit., p. 370.

The capitalist world and the international class struggle finally seem to be emerging from their stagnation, from the long phase of parliamentary guerrilla warfare, and to be ready once again to enter a period of elemental mass struggles [...] The starting point of the new revolutionary wave has shifted from West to East. Now, two violent social struggles, two proletarian mass uprisings, have broken out almost simultaneously in Germany and in Russia. They have once more suddenly brought to the surface of modern society the elemental revolutionary forces at work in its bosom⁶...

By stressing the dual phenomenon of the eruption of the Russian revolution and of the proletarian uprising in the Ruhr region in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg did not only show their conjectural coincidence in time but, first of all, the *international* character of the new wave of revolutionary struggles at the beginnings of 20th century as well as the strategic inner connection between the revolution in Russia and in Germany, its beginning in the periphery, in the East, and its uneven but combined development link with revolutionary struggles at the center, in Germany and Western Europe.

From this international perspective, by studying carefully the uneven development and specificity of class relations in Czarist Russia, Luxemburg grasps the 1905 Russian Revolution not as a belated repetition of the European bourgeois revolutions of the 19th and 18th centuries but “*the beginning of a series of proletarian revolutions in Europe*”, not an echo of the past in a pre-modern peripheral society but, on the contrary, the *most modern* event shaking the entire capitalist world: “[T]oday there stands before us”, she wrote, “a country convulsed and thoroughly shaken by the most modern of tempests that casts the glare of a mighty fire over the entire bourgeois world.”⁷

This “most modern of tempests” had revealed the *exhaustion of the historic role of the bourgeoisie* in Modern Times, already traced by Marx in his balance sheet of the 1848 Revolution in the 1850 *Address* and furthermore foresighted concretely in historical materialist terms in *Das Kapital*.⁸

Rosa Luxemburg, in her famous speech on “The Role of the bourgeoisie and the Proletariat in the Russian Revolution”, in the (London) 5th Con-

⁶ Luxemburg, *Witnesses*, op. cit., pp. 356-357.

⁷ *Witnesses*, op. cit., p. 369.

⁸ See for example K. Marx, *Capital* vol. III, Part III, chapter XV, Progress -Moscow, 1986, p. 250 and p. 266.

gress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party in May 1907, stressed the exhaustion of the historical task of the bourgeoisie and its “universal turn to reaction”:

...the bourgeoisie has long ago ceased to play the political-revolutionary role that it once did .Today ,its universal turn to reaction and a policy of tariff protection, its worship of militarism and its bargain everywhere with agrarian conservatives, all show that the fifty-eight years that have passed since the *Communist Manifesto* have had important consequences⁹.

This exhaustion is manifested in the decay of liberalism, not only in the semi-Asiatic Czarist Empire but also as Rosa said also “in Germany, France, Italy and England - in the whole of Western Europe.”¹⁰ The decay of liberalism seen by Luxemburg in early the 20th century seems to converge with the views developed much later by Karl Polanyi, in his magnum opus *The Great Transformation*, where the decay and inevitable collapse of the liberal bourgeois order that had reigned in the 19th century are considered as the deeper cause of the cataclysms of the 20th century, the two world wars, the 1929 Crash, and fascism. The great difference is that from Rosa’s perspective the leading role that the liberal bourgeoisie had played is not replaced by a multi-class, Polanyian type, resistance but by another class protagonist: the *proletariat* winning the support of other mass popular movements. She writes:

...the proletariat must regard itself not merely as a subordinate detachment of bourgeois liberalism but rather as the revolutionary movement’s vanguard ,determining its policy independently of other classes [...] the conscious proletariat must make use of any popular revolutionary movement and subordinate it to its own leadership and its own class policy¹¹.

Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky in 1905

It is clear that in her analysis of the 1905 Russian Revolution, Rosa Luxemburg comes close to the Permanent Revolution perspective advanced then by Trotsky. Trotsky who participated too in the 1907 London Congress said:

I am pleased to say that the point of view presented here by comrade Luxemburg on behalf of the Polish delegation is very close to the one that I have defended and continue to defend .Any possible differences between us are more a matter of individual nuances than of political direction .Our thinking moves on one and the

⁹ *Witnesses*, op. cit., pp. 550-551.

¹⁰ *Witnesses*, op. cit., p. 550.

¹¹ *Witnesses*, op. cit., p. 562.

same track of materialistic analysis¹².

This convergence pushed Stalin, in his crude article “Some Questions Concerning the History of Bolshevism”, in 1931, to condemn Rosa Luxemburg for the “original sin” of the theory of Permanent Revolution and to ostracize her out of the official Stalinist Vulgata in the Soviet Union.

Trotsky had replied to this article and official condemnation of Rosa Luxemburg by defending her revolutionary Marxist legacy.¹³ Later, in 1935 he put the struggle for the new Fourth International under the red flag with the three names, the three L’s that the Third International celebrated in its early period: the names of Lenin, Luxemburg, and Liebknecht.¹⁴

In 1905 and in the London Congress in 1907 there was indeed a convergence of views between Luxemburg and Trotsky on Permanent Revolution. They both moved on “the same track of materialistic analysis” but at that time there were actually differences too, which were more than in nuances.

Both Trotsky and Luxemburg emphasized the leading role of the proletariat in the Russian Revolution. They agreed that the Revolution could be victorious only by establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the peasantry. They saw that the future of the Revolution and of the revolutionary proletarian dictatorship depends on the future of the international socialist revolution and its victory in the metropolitan centers of international capitalism. But at that time, Rosa still did not see, contrary to Trotsky, the Russian revolution solving not only democratic but socialist tasks too. Even later, in 1915, discussing again the 1905 Revolution, she wrote in the “Junius Pamphlet”: “It was a proletarian revolution with bourgeois duties and problems, or if you wish, a bourgeois revolution waged by socialist proletarian methods.”¹⁵

On another deeper level, the level of dialectical-historical materialist method, there was undoubtedly a crucial convergence between Trotsky

12 Quoted in *Witnesses*, op. cit., p. 544.

13 Leon Trotsky, “Hands Off Rosa Luxemburg!”, June 1932, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/06/luxemburg.htm>.

14 L. Trotsky, “Luxemburg and the Fourth International”, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1935/06/lux.htm>.

15 R. Luxemburg, “The Junius Pamphlet”, *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Waters, 1972, p. 290.

and Luxemburg which shocked all the defenders of rigid “Marxist orthodoxy”. In the London 1907 Congress, Georgi Plekhanov remarked with irony that “Comrade Rosa Luxemburg sits on no stool. She is like one of Raphael’s Madonnas, floating on clouds...of comfortable dreams.” Rosa’s marvelous reply was:

Comrade Plekhanov is polite even when he has no intention to be ,and in this case he has paid me a genuine compliment .In order to orient oneself to the flow of events ,a Marxist must survey relations not by crawling among daily and hourly conjunctures ,but from a certain theoretical height ,and the tower from which the course of the Russian revolution must be surveyed is the international development of bourgeois class society and its level of maturity¹⁶.

The Sphinx and the riddle

The 1905 Revolution, as the “dress rehearsal” of the October 1917 Socialist Revolution, was *the laboratory of the Permanent Revolution at the dawn of the new imperialist epoch*. In this laboratory, Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky traced, analyzed, and discovered *new essential elements of this new epoch*. At the center of the theory of Permanent Revolution is situated precisely the investigation of the question of the new in the nature of the epoch.

Research and discovery are not automatic processes. The qualitatively new that abruptly emerges, a world-historic event, especially a new historical epoch full of convulsions and of all kinds of surprises interrupting the everyday life is always a challenge to the established everyday metaphysical thinking, embedded in the illusion for the immutability of the existing order of things, as Rosa rightly had remarked.

In her article on “The Revolution in Russia”, on January 28, 1905, she had drawn inspiration from ancient Greek mythology to describe revolutionary change: the figure of Sphinx who was posing an obscure riddle with lethal consequences to those passing by without being able to answer it - a myth central to Sophocles’s immortal tragedies *Oedipus the Tyrant* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Rosa Luxemburg writes:

It is a peculiarity of great revolutionary events that however much they can be foreseen and expected as a whole and in their general outline ,as soon as they come into being in all their complexity ,in their concrete form ,they always arise like a **Sphinx**, as a problem that must be observed ,studied and understood in its most

16 See *Witnesses*, op. cit., pp. 565-566.

minute details¹⁷.

To answer the riddle that the revolutionary upheaval in Russia had posed already at the beginning of the 20th century, Luxemburg (as well as Trotsky) studied it in all its complexity by surveying it from the standpoint of “the international development of bourgeois class society and its level of maturity”. What changes were taking place in international bourgeois society? What was the level of maturity of international capitalism? What is the internal relation between events in Russia and *world-historical* developments, particularly *modern imperialism*?

Rosa Luxemburg contributed to the extremely important and high-level debates on imperialism at that period by publishing *The Accumulation of Capital* in 1913, on the eve of the first world imperialist war. The book is marred with some weaknesses especially her theoretical errors on her critical reading of the reproduction schemes in Vol. II of Capital that directed her to prioritize capital’s expansion at the expense of non-capitalist economic areas and to see capitalist crisis exclusively as a crisis of realization of surplus-value.

Nevertheless, it is an important theoretical work that cannot be lightly dismissed. It includes crucial insights. It brings necessary attention to the central role of the logic of capital to understand the relationships between Global North and the Global South as well as to survey the expansion of capitalist relations at the expense of previous established non-capitalist relations in Eastern/Central Europe, the former Soviet space and China.

The devastating critique that Rosa does in this work against European colonialism, militarism, and imperialist genocidal policies could not be dismissed, either. Nobody can ignore her uncompromising defense of popular resistance, including armed struggle of the oppressed peoples in the periphery against the imperialist predators of the center of capitalism.

The internationalist stand and opposition by Rosa Luxemburg to the first world imperialist war could not and should not be separated from her previous theoretical and practical struggles. At the same time, the eruption of the Great War and the collapse of the Second International have driven Luxemburg as well as Lenin and Trotsky to re-orient themselves in new

¹⁷ *Witnesses*, op. cit., p. 358. Our emphasis.

uncharted territories of History to find answers to the new riddle posed by the Sphinx of the imperialist epoch.

In her Anti-Critique to the criticisms to *The Accumulation of Capital* Luxemburg stresses amid the ongoing world war chaos: “Imperialism brings catastrophe as a mode of existence back from the periphery of capitalist development to its point of departure.”¹⁸

In her political writings, at the same period, Rosa insists:

The imperialist phase of the rule of capitalism has indeed made peace illusory by actually declaring the dictatorship of militarism- war -to be permanent ¹⁹.Either world war to the verge of universal ruin or proletarian revolution -imperialism or socialism²⁰.

Rosa had answered the riddle of the Sphinx of the epoch as a dilemma: permanent war and barbarism or permanent revolution for world socialism.

More than a hundred years later, in our days, the same riddle is posed to humanity by today’s escalating global catastrophe in even darker terms: we have to choose either a turn to barbarism and universal extinction of life or to choose permanent revolution for world socialism and life.

Rosa the Red insists: ***choose Life!***

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18 R. Luxemburg, “The Accumulation of Capital- An Anti-Critique”, in R. Luxemburg and N. Bukharin, *Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital*, ed. K. Tarbuck, 1972, p. 147.

19 *Selected Political Writings*, op. cit., p. 204.

20 *Selected Political Writings*, op. cit., p. 234.

Rosa Luxemburg and the Russian Revolution¹

Sungur Savran

After Antonio Gramsci, the great Italian Marxist, who was redesigned and re-packaged wholesale so as to be made a liberal socialist alternative to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, it is now the turn of Rosa Luxemburg to be harnessed to a similar task. The dichotomy that is sought is the counterposition of Luxemburg to Lenin in the form of “Rosa the democrat vs. Lenin the ruthless dictator”. In this, Luxemburg’s pamphlet on the Russian revolution, written in 1918 while in prison, serves as the major weapon.

The purpose of my presentation is to show that this operation is a hoax since Rosa Luxemburg changed her opinions on the decisive issues discussed in that pamphlet in the heat of the German revolution.

The November revolution of Germany: The twin sister of the October revolution

In order to understand how Rosa Luxemburg changed her views about the policies pursued by the Bolsheviks in the revolution, one has to remember the back-

¹ This is the written text of a talk, in a slightly longer version, given at the Rosa Luxemburg Symposium organised by the Russian National Library Plekhanov House and the international organisation INPUTS held in St. Petersburg, Russian Federation on 28-29 May 2021. I would like to extend my gratitude to Aris Maravas, a Greek comrade of the EEK, for having brought to my attention the two key sources I have used for this article (see footnotes 2 and 3 below).