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Socialist Feminism: Rosa Luxemburg for Our Time

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DOES ROSA LUXEMBURG leave feminists a theoretical and political legacy? That is, does she give us any theoretical guidance as to how to understand women's oppression? If so, what is it?

Certainly Rosa Luxemburg is a model for feminists of all times in her passionate commitment both to understanding the nature of our oppressive system — and most important, to changing it — and for pursuing her own political and personal life without concern for what women were and were not supposed to do.

But what if anything would she have to say about theoretical debates among socialist feminists today? Was she even a feminist in this sense? Was her position on women's oppression similar to her position on national oppression [opposing Lenin's embrace of the right of nations to self-determination, which she saw as a diversion from class struggle — ed.]?

And on the practical political questions facing feminists today, does Luxemburg's work give us any guidance? These are the kinds of questions our panel will address.

Luxemburg and Zetkin

Luxemburg wrote next to nothing specifically regarding women, and was not active in the women's movement. Some have inferred from this that she was not a feminist, or in any case that she was not interested in women's issues.

Obviously these were not her primary area of interest, but why should they have to be — can't there be a division of labor?

Clara Zetkin, Luxemburg's close comrade and friend, is well-known for her work with working-class women, including forming groups similar to the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s, which made Lenin distinctly uneasy. I know of no evidence that Luxemburg disagreed with her work.

On the contrary, in some of her last letters of November 1918, Rosa asks Zetkin for an article on women — “which is so important now, and none of us here understand anything about it” — and then to edit a women's section of the Spartacus paper, saying “... it is such an urgent matter! Every day lost is a sin....”

Based on this correspondence and on her short writings on women's issues, it should be abundantly clear that Luxemburg was a Marxist or socialist feminist in the sense we use these terms today.

First I will say very briefly how I characterize a socialist feminist, some of whom are Marxists and some are not, and then try to say where Luxemburg would stand on the debates among us.

Among Socialist-Feminists

All socialist-feminists see class as central to women's lives, yet at the same time none would reduce sex or race oppression to economic exploitation. And all of us see these aspects of our lives as inseparably and systematically related; in other words, class is always gendered and raced.

The term "intersectionality" has come to be used for this position. Luxemburg certainly held to this kind of perspective, in that she recognized some kinds of oppression as common to all women and others varying by class and by nation.

While the special needs of working women were Luxemburg's priority, she also supported positions some might see as merely "bourgeois demands," the end to all laws that discriminated against women and women's suffrage, which she advocated both as a matter of principle and for pragmatic political reasons.

Bringing women into politics would help combat what she called "the suffocating air of the philistine family" that affected even socialist men, and would also build the ranks of the social democratic forces. These positions were actually in advance of the bourgeois women's organizations of the time.

On one occasion, she criticized social democrats willing to compromise on women's suffrage to make an electoral alliance with liberals. The most radical of socialists were often also the best feminists.

Within the broad definition of intersectionality, however, there are differences regarding how to understand these kinds of oppression and how they are related.

Some socialist feminists see capitalism and sexism (usually called "patriarchy") as two distinct, though intersecting, systems with equal explanatory importance. (Other systems to account for race/ethnic oppression are usually part of the picture too.)

Just as capitalism is constituted by relations of oppression and exploitation between capitalists and workers, patriarchy is a system in which men oppress women. Some also say men exploit women, which they explain in different ways. This is known as a "dual systems" position.

Marxist Feminism

On the other hand, other Marxist/socialist feminists believe there is only one kind of oppression and exploitation that, in the current period, really constitutes a system with full explanatory powers — and that is capitalism. However, other distinct kinds of oppression, like sexism, play more or less important roles within the framework of that system at different times and places.

One system or two — or more — is a highly abstract theoretical question, but often connected to a practical political one: what kind of political organizing should take priority? Should it always be class issues, labor struggles and other economic issues not differentiated along gender lines? Or is it legitimate from a socialist point of view to give equal importance to distinctly women's issues?

Dual systems theorists will invariably give equal political importance to organizing around class or sex (or race) issues. Why would they not? But what political implications should be drawn from the one-system theoretical position, which I accept?

In my opinion — and I want to stress this — it does not follow that struggles around sex (or race) oppression should necessarily have a lower political priority. Socialist feminists try to integrate the two, whatever their views on the abstract question of one or two systems.

For example, contemporary socialist feminists support the legal right to abortion, like liberal feminists, but we combine that with the right to birth control, medical care, childcare, better and equal pay (certainly more than \$15/hour) — all the things necessary to give working-class women a genuine choice over their reproduction.

Luxemburg, I am pretty sure, assumed the one-system position, giving theoretical primacy to capitalism as a framework in which other kinds of oppression operate. On the practical political question, I can't say for sure, but I would like to think she would have the flexible position regarding political priorities (perhaps because that is my view).

Oppression and Exploitation

In “Women's Suffrage and Class Struggle” of 1912, Luxemburg makes an important theoretical argument relevant to current debates. She writes the following:

“Only that work is productive which produces surplus value and yields capitalist profit — as long as the rule of capital and the wage system still exists. From this standpoint the dancer in a café, who makes a profit for her employer with her legs, is a productive working woman, while all the toil of the woman and mothers of the proletariat within the four walls of the home is considered unproductive work. This sounds crude and crazy, but it is an accurate expression of the crudeness and craziness of today's capitalist economic order....”

I have used this quote more than once to clarify the meaning of (un)productive labor in capitalism and to distinguish oppression from capitalist exploitation.

Some feminists are very offended by the Marxist position that housework is unproductive labor, and some argue for “wages for housework.” But as the quote from Luxemburg makes clear, designating housework as unproductive is hardly an insult, nor is it sexist. A carpenter who works for the government, or for that matter a public school teacher, are also “unproductive” in capitalist terms, though both — obviously, and very importantly — are productive in a general sense.

It's crucial to understand what “productive” means in capitalist terms, i.e. the production of surplus value, because it is this that makes the capitalist system tick.

There is more to be said about the domestic labor debate, but one important point is that even in 1912, as Luxemburg wrote, “millions of proletarian women ... produce capitalist profit just like men — in factories, workshops, agriculture, homework industries, offices and stores. They are productive therefore in the strictest economic sense of society today.”

Luxemburg used this fact as an argument for suffrage; it showed that patriarchal conceptions of women's “proper role” had become simply ridiculous.

I agree with Luxemburg on this theoretical point and on its importance. However, I think we must be

careful not to overstate its political importance.

Even if housework were productive of surplus value, it wouldn't follow that organizing housewives should be a priority for socialists. Compare guards in private prisons who do produce surplus value. Though exploited by capital, they certainly would not be promising candidates for socialist organizing.

On the other hand, while public sector workers are not productive in this sense, they are a key sector for labor organizing today and should be, given the attacks on the public sector. Where socialists should put their best energies depends on many factors and we need to be alert to changing conditions.

Luxemburg's stress on the meaning of "productive" labor in this crazy capitalist system also helps to explain why capitalism is leading to the destruction of our planet and why we need to build a society based on production for human needs, not profit. Organizing around this issue has to be central to everyone today.

Luxemburg argued for a working-women's organization independent of the bourgeois women's movement, so that they could better fight for their specific needs, while at the same time supporting universal women's interests.

More controversially, she also supported independent self-organization within the working class and even among socialists, encouraging Zetkin to found a women's section of the Spartacus League. This position, I would point out, is ahead of many Marxists today.

So in conclusion, there is much that Luxemburg's life and work can offer to contemporary socialist feminists. We need not look to her for all the answers, and we might find some areas of disagreement, but no more than we would likely find in this room.

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P.S.

* "Rosa Luxemburg for Our Time". From Against the Current n° 181, March-April 2016:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/4585>