

Either-Or: Rosa Luxemburg and Internationalism

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At many points throughout its long history, the labor movement has confronted a choice: either support nationalism, “national defense,” and war, or fight for internationalism: “Proletarians of all countries unite!” This fateful choice has determined the course of history at many decisive moments.

Few figures in the socialist movement were as committed to the internationalist program as Rosa Luxemburg. She was Jewish, Polish, and German, but her one and only “motherland” was the Socialist International. It is true, however, that this radical internationalism led her to take questionable positions on the national question. For instance, concerning Poland, her native country, she not only opposed the call for Polish national independence, raised by the “social-patriots” of Józef Piłsudski’s Polish Socialist Party (PPS), but rejected the Bolshevik support for Poland’s right of self-determination (including the right of separation from Russia). Until 1914, she would base her views on “economistic” arguments: because Poland’s economy was already integrated in the Russian one, Polish independence was a purely utopian demand, shared only by reactionary aristocratic or petty-bourgeois layers. She would also conceive nations as essentially “cultural” phenomena, therefore proposing “cultural autonomy” as the solution for national demands. Missing in her approach is precisely the *political* dimension of the national question, emphasized in Vladimir Lenin’s writings on the issue: the *democratic right* of self-determination.

Yet in one article, at least, she dealt with the issue in a much more open and dialectical way: the 1905 introduction to the collection *The Polish Question and the Socialist Movement*. In this essay she makes a careful distinction between the legitimate right of every nation to independence—“which stems from the elementary principles of socialism”—and the desirability of this independence for Poland, which she denies. She also insists that national oppression is “the most unbearable oppression in its barbarity” and can only provoke “hostility and rebellion.”¹ However, some years later, in her 1918 notebook on the Russian Revolution—which contains very valuable criticism of the Bolshevik curtailments of democracy and freedom—she once again rejects any reference to the nation’s right of self-determination as “empty petty-bourgeois phraseology.”²

Most discussions of Rosa Luxemburg’s internationalism—including some written by the author of these lines—deal mainly, and sometimes only, with her questionable thesis on national rights. What is missing here, however, is the positive side of her views: her outstanding contribution to the Marxist conception of proletarian internationalism, and her stubborn refusal to give in to nationalist and chauvinist ideologies. In the following pages I will briefly try to summarize this contribution.

Georg Lukács, in his chapter on “Rosa Luxemburg’s Marxism” in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), argues that the dialectical category of totality is “the true carrier of the revolutionary principle in science.”³ He saw Luxemburg’s writings, especially her *Accumulation of Capital* (1913), as a striking example of this dialectical approach. But the same thing can be said of her

internationalism: she analyzed, discussed, and judged all social and political issues from the viewpoint of totality, that is, from the perspective of the interests of the international working-class movement. This dialectical totality was not an abstraction, an empty universalism, or a conglomerate of undifferentiated beings; indeed, Luxemburg knew well that the international proletariat was a human plurality composed of people with their own cultures, languages, and history; their conditions of life and work were also very different. In *The Accumulation of Capital*, there is a long description of the forced labor in the mines and plantations of South Africa: nothing equivalent could be found in German factories. But this diversity, she argues, should not pose an obstacle to common action. In other words, for her, as for Marx and Engels, internationalism meant “Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!”—the unity of the workers from all countries against their common enemy: the capitalist system, imperialism, imperialist wars.

This is why Luxemburg refused, soon after her arrival in Germany and entry into the ranks of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), any concessions to militarism, military credits, naval expeditions, and so on. While the Social Democratic right wing—including Wolfgang Heine and Max Schippel—were willing to negotiate agreements with the government of the kaiser on these issues, she openly denounced such capitulations, supposedly justified by the “need to create jobs.” Historian Peter Nettl, in his useful, if limited, biography of Luxemburg, is very much mistaken when he considers her internationalist opposition to such concessions as an “arid and formal exercise,” based on the belief that unemployment is a necessary stimulant for class struggle.⁴

For Luxemburg, internationalism was not, like for so many other socialists of her time, limited to the European countries. Very early on, before most other socialist leaders, she was an active opponent to the colonial policies of the European imperial states, and she did not hide her sympathy for the struggles of the colonial peoples. This included, of course, German colonial wars in Africa, such as the brutal repression of the Herero uprising in South West Africa (1904). In a public speech in June 1911, she explained:

“The Hereros are a [N]egro people, which has lived for centuries in their homeland ... Their “crime” was that they did not give in to white slave-drivers ... and defended their land (Heimat) against foreign invaders ... In this war too the German weapons were richly covered with glory ... The men were shot, the women and children ... pushed into the burning desert.”⁵

In a piece from 1902, “Martinique,” she denounces the crimes of Western colonialism in the Antilles, Madagascar, the Philippines, and, above all, China, where France, England, Russia and Germany “united in a great league of nations” to murder and plunder the country. She does not forget U.S. imperialism, recalling how “the sugar cane Senate” in Washington sent “cannon upon cannon, warship upon warship, golden dollars millions upon millions, to Cuba, to sow death and devastation.”⁶

While Luxemburg condemned German imperialist pretensions in North Africa—the so-called Morocco incident in 1911, when Germany sent warships to Agadir—she described French colonialism in Algeria as a brutal attempt to impose bourgeois private property against the ancient clan communism of the Arab tribes.⁷ In her lectures on political economy at the school of the SPD in 1907–1908, she emphasized the connection between the modern communism of the proletarian masses in the advanced capitalist countries and the “ancient communist survivals that put up stubborn resistance in the colonial countries to the forward march of profit-hungry” imperial domination.⁸ And in her most important economic essay, *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), she argues that capitalist accumulation on a global scale is not only an early stage but a permanent process of violent expropriation:

“The accumulation of capital, seen as an historical process, employs force as a permanent weapon,

*not only in its genesis, but further on down to the present day. From the point of view of the primitive societies involved, it is a matter of life or death; for them there can be no other attitude than opposition and fight to the finish ... Hence permanent occupation of the colonies by the military, native risings and punitive expeditions are the order of the day for any colonial regime.”*⁹

There were very few socialists who at that time not only denounced colonial expeditions but *justified colonized peoples’ resistance and struggles*. This attitude reveals the truly universal nature of her internationalism—even if, of course, Europe was at the center of her attention.

Luxemburg saw, clearly enough, the rising danger of a European war, and never ceased to denounce the war preparations of the Imperial German government. On September 13, 1913, she ended a talk she gave in Bockenheim, a town near Frankfurt, with a solemn internationalist statement: “If they think we are going to lift the weapons of murder against our French and other brethren, then we shall shout: ‘We will never do it!’” She was immediately charged by the public prosecutor with “calling for public disobedience of the law.” At the trial, which took place in February 1914, and Luxemburg gave a fearless speech, attacking militarism and war politics, and quoting a resolution from the 1868 Brussels Conference of the First International: in case of war, the workers should call a general strike. The talk was printed in the socialist press and became a classic of anti-war literature. She was sentenced to one year in jail, but only after the beginning of the war, in 1915, did the imperial authorities dare to arrest her.¹⁰

While many other socialists and Marxists in Europe supported their own governments in August 1914, at the beginning of World War I, in the name of the “defense of the fatherland,” she immediately tried to organize opposition to the imperialist war. Her writings during these first crucial months make no concessions to the aggressive official “patriotic” ideology, while developing increasingly critical arguments against the miserable treason of the SPD leaders to the principles of proletarian internationalism.

To explain what he calls her “growing hatred” of the SPD policies, Nettl points to a “strong personal element”: “the eternal, ill-suppressed impatience and frustration of émigrés like Rosa Luxemburg with the ponderous and ‘official’ Germans.” Unfortunately, this “personal” explanation is not very useful. For, as Nettl himself acknowledges, opposition to the war among the SPD was not limited to foreign “émigrés,” but included several authentically German figures, among them Karl Liebknecht, Franz Mehring, and Clara Zetkin.¹¹

In fact, the motivation for Luxemburg’s indignation against the social-patriotic capitulation of August 1914 was not “émigré impatience,” but a lifelong commitment to internationalism. Jailed several times for her anti-militaristic and anti-nationalistic propaganda, she summarized her principled standpoint in an essay from 1916 entitled “Either-Or” (“Entweder-oder”), published as a clandestine pamphlet by the Spartacus League: “The fatherland of the proletariat, the defense of which must take precedence over all else, is the Socialist International.” The time for half measures and hesitations was over: it was either-or. “Either open and shameless betrayal of the International ... or taking the International in sacred seriousness, so that she becomes ... a bastion of the world socialist proletariat and of world peace.”¹²

Given that the Second International had collapsed under the impact of what she called “social-chauvinism”—substituting for “Proletarians of all countries unite!” the proposal “Proletarians of all countries, cut each other’s throats!”—Luxemburg issued a call for the creation of a new International. In her proposal outlining the basic principles for this future International, she emphasized: “There can be no socialism outside the international solidarity of the proletariat and there can be no socialism without class struggle. The socialist proletariat cannot renounce the class struggle and international solidarity, either in war or in peace, without committing suicide.”¹³ This

was, of course, an answer to the influential theoretician Karl Kautsky's hypocritical argument that the International was a tool for times of peace, but unfortunately inadequate to address a situation of war—an idea that served as justification for his support of German “national defense” in 1914.

“Either-Or” includes a personal statement, in the form of a moving confession of Luxemburg's most cherished ethical and political values: “The international fraternity of the workers is for me the highest and the most sacred thing on earth, it is my guiding star, my ideal, my fatherland; I prefer to give up my life, than to become unfaithful to this ideal!”¹⁴

Luxemburg was prophetic in her warnings against the evils of imperialism, nationalism and militarism. A prophet is not someone who miraculously predicts the future, but one who, like Amos and Isaiah, warns the people of the catastrophe that lies ahead, unless collective action is taken to prevent it. Among other prognostications, she warned that there will always be new wars, as long as imperialism and capitalism continue to exist:

*“World peace cannot be secured by such utopian or basically reactionary plans as international courts of arbitration composed of capitalist diplomats, diplomatic agreements concerning ‘disarmament’ ..., ‘European federations’, ‘middle-European customs unions’, ‘national buffer states’ and the like. Imperialism, militarism and wars will not be abolished or damned as long as the rule of the capitalist classes continues uncontested.”*¹⁵

She warned against nationalism as a mortal enemy of the workers and of the socialist movement, and as the breeding ground for militarism and war. “The immediate task of socialism,” she wrote in 1916 “shall be the intellectual liberation of the proletariat from the domination of the bourgeoisie as manifest in the influence of nationalistic ideology.”¹⁶ In the “Fragment on War, the National Question and Revolution” (1918) she worries about the sudden rise of nationalist movements during the last year of the war: “at the nationalist Blockberg it is today the Walpurgis night” (a reference to the German mythological witches sabbath). These movements are of very different natures, some being the expression of less developed bourgeois classes (like in the Balkans), while others, such as Italian nationalism, are purely imperial-colonial. This “present world-explosion of nationalisms” contains a colorful variety of special interests, but is united by a common interest flowing from the exceptional historical situation created by October 1917: to fight the threat of the proletarian world-revolution.¹⁷

What she meant by “nationalism” was not, of course, the national culture, or the national identity of different peoples, but the ideology that makes “The Nation” into the supreme political value, to which everything else has to be submitted (“Deutschland über alles”).

Her warnings were prophetic, in so far as some of the worst crimes of the 20th century—from the First to the Second World War (Auschwitz, Hiroshima) and beyond—were committed in the name of nationalism, national hegemony, “national defense,” “national vital space,” and the like. Stalinism itself is the product of a nationalist degeneration of the Soviet State, embodied in the slogan “Socialism in a single country.”

One can criticize some of her positions in relation to national demands, but she clearly perceived the dangers of national state politics: territorial conflicts, “ethnic cleansing,” oppression of minorities. Of course, she could not have predicted genocides.

Today, the issue of internationalism has again come to the fore. Capital globalization has imposed its power on a world scale, to a degree unprecedented in history, promoting obscene degrees of inequality, and leading to catastrophic consequences to the environment (climate change). Through its institutions – IMF, World Bank, WTO, G-8 – it has achieved a united bloc of the capitalist ruling

classes, around neoliberalism and deregulation. The subaltern classes are lagging behind, fragmented and dispersed, and without efficient forms of international organization.

The main sign of hope is the new international movement for global justice, which is sowing the seeds of a new internationalist culture. The convergence of socialists, trade-unionists, feminists, ecologists, workers, peasants, indigenous communities, networks of direct action in the common struggle against corporate – i.e. capitalist – globalization, is an important step forward.

Rosa Luxemburg's heritage cannot give all the answers, but it can suggest some important lessons for this movement:

- I) The enemy is not "globalization," or just "neoliberalism," but the world capitalist system itself.
- II) As long as this system prevails there will be new wars, new imperialist interventions, new ethnic purges.
- III) The alternative to global capitalist hegemony is not "national sovereignty," the defense of the national against the global. It is to globalize, i.e., internationalize, resistance.
- IV) The capitalist system breeds nationalism, xenophobia, racism, as well as fascist or semi-fascist forms, which make up a mortal danger for democracy and socialism.
- V) The alternative to the empires is not a "regulated," "humanized" form of capitalism, but a new, socialist and democratic, world civilization.

Rosa Luxemburg's internationalism is particularly relevant in the 21st century for an issue which in her times was practically unknown: the ecological crisis. Climate change knows no national borders, it is a global issue which can be dealt with only on an international scale. This has been well understood by an improbable heir to Luxemburg, the young Greta Thunberg, who called for a successful global school strike which mobilized millions of young people around the planet.

Climate change is the greatest threat to life in human history. Some bourgeois governments (Trump, Bolsonaro) deny climate change and, in the name of the "national interest," energetically promote fossil fuels; others (Europe, the U.S under Biden, and Canada) pretend to take some measures to reduce their carbon emissions, but without any effective result. All are committed to the rules of the market and of capital accumulation, acting according to the needs of "competitiveness" of their national economies.

To paraphrase a well-known passage by Walter Benjamin: either we stop, by pulling the revolutionary emergency brakes, the train of modern capitalist industrial civilization, or it will continue its suicidal course toward an abyss: ecological catastrophe. Here, too, the time for half measures is over. It is either-or, *entweder-oder*.

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Notes

1. Rosa Luxemburg, *Internationalismus und Klassenkampf*. Die polnische Schriften, Jürgen Hentze, ed. (Berlin: Luchterhand, 1971), 192, 217.
2. Rosa Luxemburg, *Die Russische Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, [1918] 1963), 60.

3. Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein. Studien über marxistische Dialektik* (Berlin: Malik Verlag, 1923), 39.
4. Peter Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, Vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 296-97.
5. Rosa Luxemburg, "Unser Kampf um die Macht," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, [1911] 1972), 537. The German extermination war against the Hereros is now widely considered as the first genocide of the twentieth century.
6. Rosa Luxemburg, "Martinique," in *Reflections and Writings*, Paul Le Blanc, ed. (Humanity Books, 1999), 125-26.
7. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (London: Routledge, [1913] 1951), 384.
8. Rosa Luxemburg, "Introduction to Political Economy," in *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg*, Vol. 1, *Economic Writings I*, Peter Hudis, ed. (London and New York: Verso, [1907-1908] 2014), 163.
9. Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, 371
10. J.P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, abr. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 321-22; Rosa Luxemburg, "Militarismus, Krieg und Arbeiterklasse. Rede vor der Frankfurter Strafkammer" (February 24, 1914), in *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften*, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1955), 499.
11. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, abr. ed., 373.
12. Rosa Luxemburg, "Entweder-Oder," *Ausgewählte Schriften*, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, [1916] 1951), 550, 543.
13. Rosa Luxemburg, "Either-Or," in *Selected Political Writings*, Robert Looker, ed., W.D. Graf, trans. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), 225
Available on ESSF (article 59049), [Either-Or: Rosa Luxemburg and Internationalism](#).
14. Luxemburg, "Entweder-Oder," 542.
15. R. Luxemburg, "Either-Or," p.224.
16. R. Luxemburg, "Either-Or," p.226.
17. R. Luxemburg, "Fragment über Krieg, Nationale Frage und Revolution" (1918), in *Die Russische Revolution*, pp. 82, 85.

P.S.

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