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# Hannah Arendt lettrice di Rosa Luxemburg

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*a cura di*

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“Rosa Luxemburg è tornata tra noi”  
(uno studente di Hannah Arendt a Berkeley)

Lo scritto di Hannah Arendt *Rosa Luxemburg 1871-1919*, una lunga recensione alla biografia di Peter J. Nettl che qui proponiamo in versione originale, apparve nel 1966 in “The New York Review of Books” e fu in seguito pubblicato nella raccolta di scritti dal titolo *Men in Dark Times* (Harvest Book, Harcourt, New York 1968, pp. 33-56; Dal Lago 1989). L’articolo, il cui titolo era originariamente *A Heroine of Revolution*, è un tributo a una figura di donna e di rivoluzionaria che sentiva profondamente vicina.

Ad accomunarle vi era in primo luogo l’origine ebraica, l’esperienza dello sradicamento, il coraggio intellettuale e politico, lo spirito di indipendenza. Entrambe elaborarono una concezione della politica fondata sull’idea di libertà che escludeva la categoria del dominio, si interrogarono per tutte le loro vite sullo spazio comunitario, fonte del potere politico e fondamento di una democrazia autentica, capace di inventare, sperimentare e aprire spazi di libertà (D’Alessandro 2011). Benché entrambe non avessero una prospettiva di genere e non si identificassero con il femminismo, i loro scritti e il loro pensiero sono stati fonte di ispirazione per la riflessione femminista sulla politica (Honig 1995).

Nella figura e nel pensiero di Luxemburg si poteva individuare, a parere di Arendt, la possibilità di un socialismo libertario, estraneo tanto al comunismo che al socialismo riformista, un’idea di socialismo che si avvicinava alla pratica diretta della politica a cui la filosofa tedesca dedicò la sua riflessione nel corso di tutta la vita, forse a partire da quel lontano gennaio 1919 quando accompagnò la madre Marta, ardente ammiratrice di Rosa Luxemburg, ad una riunione del circolo di Königsberg in cui si seguivano e discutevano le notizie che provenivano da Berlino sullo sciopero generale. “Mentre facevano di corsa la strada Marta Arendt gridava alla figlia: ‘Fa bene attenzione, perché questo è un momento storico’” (Young-

Bruehl 1994). In seguito sarà il marito Heinrich Blücher, al tempo un giovane spartachista, a raccontarle ricordi e aneddoti su Rosa Luxemburg. Negli anni Cinquanta, quando stava scrivendo *La condizione umana*, Arendt si immerse nello studio dello scritto di Luxemburg *La rivoluzione russa*. L'esperienza vissuta della rivoluzione e le riflessioni della socialista polacca ispirarono la visione di Arendt sulla rivoluzione come un evento spontaneo, creatore di uno spazio politico aperto, un evento "politicogenetico" (Tamboukou 2014, p. 31).

Nei consigli degli operai e dei contadini tedeschi del 1918, vera "scuola della vita pubblica" secondo Luxemburg, così come nella rivoluzione ungherese del 1956, nella Primavera di Praga, nelle assemblee studentesche a Berkeley e poi in quelle di Francia e Italia, nei movimenti di disobbedienza civile negli Stati Uniti, Arendt vide l'unica possibilità di opporsi al pericolo totalitario della modernità. Scriverà molti anni più tardi in *Sulla Rivoluzione*:

L'aspetto più sconcertante dei consigli era che essi attraversavano non solo tutte le linee dei partiti, e riunivano membri di diversi partiti, ma che questa appartenenza partitica non aveva alcuna importanza. Erano insomma gli unici organi politici aperti ai cittadini che non appartenevano a nessun partito. Perciò entravano inevitabilmente in conflitto con tutte le assemblee, coi vecchi parlamenti non meno che con le "nuove assemblee costituenti", per la semplice ragione che queste ultime, anche nei loro settori più estremisti, erano pur sempre figlie del sistema partitico. In questa fase, ossia nel bel mezzo della rivoluzione, erano i programmi di partito che più di qualsiasi altra cosa dividevano i consigli dai partiti; perché questi programmi, per rivoluzionari che fossero, erano tutti "formule preconfezionate" che non richiedevano azione, ma esecuzione – "di essere messe energicamente in pratica", come puntualizzava Rosa Luxemburg, con la sua straordinaria chiarezza di idee sulla posta in gioco (Arendt 1983, pp. 305-306).

La rivoluzione per Arendt è il solo evento politico che ci pone di fronte all'inizio, concetto cruciale nella sua filosofia politica. Gli esseri umani sono nuovi inizi, con la nascita fanno la loro apparizione nel mondo, con il loro agire vi portano il nuovo.

A partire dalla fine degli anni Ottanta le affinità tra il pensiero di Rosa Luxemburg e quello Hannah Arendt sono state oggetto di numerosi studi benché la lettura che la filosofa tedesca fece della rivoluzionaria polacca non sia stato trattato in modo sistematico (Cocks 1996; Moreault 2001; Blätter- Marti-Saner 2005; Spencer 2006; D'Alessandro 2011; Tamboukou 2014).

Un punto di riferimento decisivo per un confronto tra le due pensatrici è stato lo scritto del 1966 in cui Hannah Arendt si augurava che finalmente le idee di Rosa Luxemburg trovassero posto nell'insegnamento del pensiero politico nei paesi occidentali dove il sistema politico non lasciava più spazio all'esercizio della democrazia e non offriva le condizioni necessarie per l'esercizio della libertà. Nella teoria politica di Rosa Luxemburg la filosofa tedesca individuò non soltanto una critica radicale della teoria leninista, ma anche una critica ai partiti politici moderni.

Due in particolare erano le idee della rivoluzionaria polacca che avrebbero dovuto essere insegnate: l'idea della giustizia e la teoria dell'azione.

La giustizia in Luxemburg è un concetto morale e politico: è scopo dell'azione politica e ne è anche il movente decisivo, ovvero quello spirito etico che rende capaci di lottare contro le ingiustizie (Moreault 2001, p. 231).

In Arendt la giustizia, concetto costitutivo della sua teoria politica, è il principio che dirige l'azione, che spinge gli attori politici ad agire "di concerto" per "amore del mondo", l'essenza della vita di una comunità.

Ma è soprattutto la teoria dell'azione politica di Rosa Luxemburg che meritava di essere insegnata, un'azione che emerge sempre spontaneamente, in modo impreveduto. Pertanto gli organismi rappresentativi possono essere solo il prodotto dell'azione, non già ciò che la determina. Scrisse nel 1915 in *Juniusbroschüre*:

L'effettivo svolgimento di grandi manifestazioni popolari e azioni di massa in questa o in quella forma, è deciso da tutta una serie di fattori economici, politici e psicologici, dal livello di tensione del contrasto di classe, dal grado di educazione, dal punto di maturazione raggiunto dalla combattività delle masse, elementi tutti imponderabili e che nessun partito può artificialmente manipolare. Ecco la differenza tra le grandi crisi storiche e le piccole azioni di parata che un partito ben disciplinato può in tempi di pace pulitamente eseguire con un colpo di bacchetta delle "istanze" (Luxemburg 1975, p. 496).

Esperienza e partecipazione, lo spirito vivente del socialismo, avrebbero dovuto costantemente penetrare e orientare gli organismi rappresentativi. L'angusta tattica di partito che considerava l'organizzazione il presupposto essenziale per l'azione e tendeva a ignorare il ruolo della volontà umana nella storia, privava il proletariato dell'iniziativa e della responsabilità. L'insistenza di Luxemburg sulla spontaneità si fondava su un modo di intendere l'emancipazione centrato sulle forme dell'azione collettiva il cui successo si misurava essenzialmente in un avanzamento in termini di esperienza, conoscenza, consapevolezza di sé nelle relazioni con gli altri.

Ella inoltre poneva un' enfasi particolare sul potenziale creativo dell'azione collettiva, su quel processo di autoemancipazione che porta alla trasformazione sociale e politica e ne fa il fondamento della sua critica alla dirigenza dei partiti della Seconda Internazionale che non riconosceva alla classe operaia la capacità di auto emanciparsi.

Tra spontaneità, anima dell'azione, e coscienza vi è un rapporto dialettico; è nel corso del conflitto che matura la consapevolezza e i capi diventano strumenti dell'azione cosciente delle masse. In Arendt, come in Rosa Luxemburg, l'enfasi è sull'esperienza umana, sulla libertà di cambiare il mondo, di creare un nuovo fondamento della comunità. L'agire "di concerto", la vera anima della politica, è sempre innovativo e quindi rivoluzionario. Scrive Arendt in *La disobbedienza civile*:

Al pari del rivoluzionario, colui che fa atto di disobbedienza civile prova il desiderio di "cambiare il mondo" e quelli che vuole compiere sono mutamenti radicali [...]. Il cambiamento è inerente a un mondo abitato e costituito da esseri umani che nascendo vi entrano come estranei e nuovi venuti e lo lasciano al momento in cui ne hanno fatto l'esperienza e si sono familiarizzati con esso (Arendt 1985, p. 60).

Per entrambe le pensatrici la condizione dell'agire politico è la pluralità, ovvero la libertà di poter esprimere sempre una opinione dissidente. E la libertà è la condizione della giustizia. Solo in una tale atmosfera politica gli esseri umani si sarebbero potuti avviare verso un futuro migliore.

Non sorprende pertanto che le riflessioni di Rosa Luxemburg sulla rivoluzione bolscevica siano al centro dello scritto di Arendt del 1966. Il fanatismo dell'organizzazione, aveva denunciato la rivoluzionaria polacca nel 1918, stava

soffocando la spontaneità e ostacolando il processo di costruzione della democrazia. Riprendendo la biografia di Netti, scrive Arendt:

Il punto principale è che aveva appreso dai consigli degli operai rivoluzionari (i successivi *soviet*) che “la buona organizzazione non precede l’azione, ma ne è il prodotto”, che “l’organizzazione dell’azione rivoluzionaria può e deve essere appresa nella rivoluzione, come si può imparare a nuotare nell’acqua”, che le rivoluzioni non sono “fatte” da nessuno, ma scoppiano improvvisamente e che la spinta dell’azione proviene sempre “dal basso”. Una rivoluzione è “grande e forte fin quando la socialdemocrazia [a quell’epoca ancora il solo partito rivoluzionario] non la manda in rovina” (Dal Lago 1989, p. 58).

Lenin, al contrario, equiparava spontaneità a incoscienza e immaturità; era il partito l’avanguardia cosciente del proletariato. Nello scritto del 1966 Arendt afferma che Lenin dalla rivoluzione del 1905 trasse le seguenti conclusioni:

che non fosse necessaria una grande organizzazione; un piccolo gruppo solidamente organizzato, con un capo che sapeva quello che voleva era sufficiente ad abbattere il potere una volta che l’autorità del vecchio regime fosse crollata. Le grandi organizzazioni rivoluzionarie erano solo un ingombro, poiché le rivoluzioni non erano “fatte”, ma erano il risultato di circostanze ed eventi al di là del potere di chiunque, le guerre erano le benvenute (*Ibidem*).

Questa idea era particolarmente ripugnante per Rosa Luxemburg per la quale la rivoluzione non poteva trarre vantaggio dalla violenza e dai massacri. “Gli inusitati atti di violenza commessi dai bolscevichi mi tolgono il sonno”, scrisse in carcere e “tremava al pensiero che l’esempio bolscevico divenisse un modello per il mondo socialista” (Mullaney 1983, p. 137).

Un altro concetto che Arendt colse e valorizzò della riflessione di Luxemburg è quello di barbarie. Nella prima guerra mondiale la socialista polacca vide una catastrofe politica e morale che minacciava di aprire la via a nuovi terribili esiti, alla barbarie. In *Juniusbroschüre* introduce questo termine con un significato che non ha nulla di retorico: “la guerra è una regressione nella barbarie”, ovvero è il trionfo dell’imperialismo, della distruzione della cultura, è spopolamento, desolazione, degenerazione. La mobilitazione totale di uomini, materiali, conoscenze obbediva a un progetto di dominio totale, fatale conseguenza del nazionalismo e dell’imperialismo, di un sistema inerentemente espansionista che avrebbe posto le premesse di un altro conflitto mondiale.

Anche l’interpretazione arendtiana dell’imperialismo come espressione politica dell’accumulazione capitalistica nella sua corsa per impadronirsi del resto del mondo non capitalista, deve molto alla “brillante intuizione di Rosa Luxemburg” (Arendt 1996, pp. 206-207) in *L’accumulazione del capitale* da cui prende le mosse la sua teoria del totalitarismo.

Distrutta la solidarietà di classe, scrive la filosofa tedesca, la guerra aveva lasciato gli individui isolati e vulnerabili, aveva sradicato milioni di persone e posto le basi per lo sviluppo della società di massa e il dominio totalitario. “Il crollo della muraglia protettiva classista trasformò le maggioranze addormentate, fino ad allora a rimorchio dei partiti, in una grande massa, disorganizzata e amorfa, di individui pieni d’odio [...] In questa atmosfera di sfacelo generale si formò la mentalità dell’uomo di massa europeo” (*Ivi*, pp. 436-437) affascinato dal leader, pronto a trasferire su di lui ogni responsabilità, creatività, azione. Arendt dunque sviluppa l’analisi di Luxemburg sull’espropriazione per includere, oltre alla terra, alle risorse

se naturali, al lavoro, l'autodeterminazione umana che culmina nella società di massa, nell'omologazione forzata, nel declino della pluralità e della libertà.

L'apice di una tale catastrofe si raggiungerà con i campi di sterminio, la vera istituzione del potere totalitario, il culmine della barbarie.

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**Hannah Arendt,**  
***Rosa Luxemburg 1871-1919***

Lengthy, thoroughly documented, heavily annotated, and generously splashed with quotations, it usually comes in two large volumes and tells more, and more vividly, about the historical period in question than all but the most outstanding history books. For unlike other biographies, history is here not treated as the inevitable background of a famous person's life span; it is rather as though the colorless light of historical time were forced through and refracted by the prism of a great character so that in the resulting spectrum a complete unity of life and world is achieved. This may be why it has become the classical genre for the lives of great statesmen but has remained rather unsuitable for those in which the main interest lies in the life story, or for the lives of artists, writers, and, generally, men or women whose genius forced them to keep the world at a certain distance and whose significance lies chiefly in their works, the artifacts they added to the world, not in the role they played in it<sup>1</sup> [33].

It was a stroke of genius on the part of J. P. Nettl to choose the life of Rosa Luxemburg<sup>2</sup>, the most unlikely candidate, as a proper subject for a genre that seems suitable only for the lives of great statesmen and other persons of the world. She certainly was nothing of the kind. Even in her own world of the European socialist movement she was a rather marginal figure, with relatively brief moments of splendor and great brilliance, whose influence in deed and written word can hardly be compared to that of her contemporaries – to Plekhanov, Trotsky, and Lenin, to Bebel and Kautsky, to Jaurès and Millerand. If success in the world is a prerequisite for success in the genre how could Mr. Nettl succeed with this woman who when very young had been swept into the German Social Democratic Party from her native Poland; who continued to play a key role in the little known and neglected history of Polish socialism and who then for about two decades, although never officially recognized, became the most controversial and least understood figure in the German Left movement? For it was precisely success – success even in her own world of revolutionaries – which was withheld from Rosa Luxemburg in life, death, and after death. Can it be that the failure of all her efforts as far as official recognition is concerned is somehow connected with the dismal failure of revolu-

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<sup>1</sup> Another limitation has become more obvious in recent years when Hitler and Stalin, because of their importance for contemporary history, were treated to the undeserved honor of definitive biographies. No matter how scrupulously Alan Bullock in his book on Hitler and Isaac Deutscher in his biography of Stalin followed the methodological technicalities prescribed by the genre, to see history in the light of these non-persons could only result in their falsifying promotion to respectability and in a more subtle distortion of the events. When we want to see both events and persons in right proportion we still have to go to the much less well-documented and factually incomplete biographies of Hitler and Stalin by Konrad Heiden and Boris Souvarine respectively.

<sup>2</sup> *Rosa Luxemburg*, 2 vols., Oxford University Press, 1966.

tion in our century? Will history look different if seen through the prism of her life and work?

However that may be, I know no book that sheds more light on the crucial period of European socialism from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the fateful day in January 1919 when Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the two leaders of the [34] *Spartakusbund*, the precursor of the German Communist Party, were murdered in Berlin – under the eyes and probably with the connivance of the Socialist regime then in power. The murderers were members of the ultra-nationalist and officially illegal *Freikorps*, a paramilitary organization from which Hitler's storm troopers were soon to recruit their most promising killers. That the government at the time was practically in the hands of the *Freikorps* because they enjoyed “the full support of Noske” the Socialists' expert on national defense, then in charge of military affairs, was confirmed only recently by Captain Pabst, the last surviving participant in the assassination. The Bonn government – in this as in other respects only too eager to revive the more sinister traits of the Weimar Republic – let it be known that it was thanks to the *Freikorps* that Moscow had failed to incorporate all of Germany into a red Empire after the First World War and that the murder of Liebknecht and Luxemburg was entirely legal “an execution in accordance with martial law”<sup>3</sup>. This was considerably more than even the Weimar Republic had ever pretended, for it had never admitted publicly that the *Freikorps* actually were an arm of the government and it had “punished” the murderers by meting out a sentence of two years and two weeks to the soldier Runge for “attempted manslaughter” (he had hit Rosa Luxemburg over the head in the corridors of the Hotel Eden), and four months to Lieutenant Vogel (he was the officer in charge when she was shot in the head inside a car and thrown into the Landwehr Canal) for “failing to report a corpse and illegally disposing of it”. During the trial, a photograph showing Runge and his comrades celebrating the assassination in the same hotel on the following day was introduced as evidence, which caused the defendant great merriment. “Accused Runge, you must behave properly. This is no laughing matter”, said the presiding judge. Forty-five years later, during the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt, a similar scene took place; the same words were spoken. [35]

With the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Liebknecht, the split of the European Left into Socialist and Communist parties became irrevocable; “the abyss which the Communists had pictured in theory had become ... the abyss of the grave”. And since this early crime had been aided and abetted by the government, it initiated the death dance in postwar Germany: The assassins of the extreme Right started by liquidating prominent leaders of the extreme Left – Hugo Haase and Gustav Landauer, Leo Jogiches and Eugene Leviné – and quickly moved to the center and the right-of-center to Walther Rathenau and Matthias Erzberger, both members of the government at the time of their murder. Thus Rosa Luxemburg's death became the watershed between two eras in Germany; and it became the point of no return for the German Left. All those who had drifted to the Communists out of bitter disap-

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<sup>3</sup> See the *Bulletin des Presse-und Informationsamtes der Bundesregierung*, of February 8, 1962, p. 224.

pointment with the Socialist Party were even more disappointed with the swift moral decline and political disintegration of the Communist Party, and yet they felt that to return to the ranks of the Socialists would mean to condone the murder of Rosa. Such personal reactions, which are seldom publicly admitted, are among the small, mosaic-like pieces that fall into place in the large riddle of history. In the case of Rosa Luxemburg they are part of the legend which soon surrounded her name. Legends have a truth of their own, but Mr. Nettl is entirely right to have paid almost no attention to the Rosa myth. It was his task, difficult enough, to restore her to historical life.

Shortly after her death, when all persuasions of the Left had already decided that she had always been “mistaken” (a “really hopeless case”, as George Lichtheim, the last in this long line, put it in *Encounter*), a curious shift in her reputation took place. Two small volumes of her letters were published, and these, entirely personal and of a simple, touchingly humane, and often poetic beauty, were enough to destroy the propaganda image of bloodthirsty “Red Rosa”, at least in all but the most obstinately anti-Semitic and reactionary circles. However, what then grew up was another legend – the sentimentalized image of the bird watcher and lover of flowers, a woman whose guards said good-by [36] to her with tears in their eyes when she left prison – as if they couldn’t go on living without being entertained by this strange prisoner who had insisted on treating them as human beings. Nettl does not mention this story, faithfully handed down to me when I was a child and later confirmed by Kurt Rosenfeld, her friend and lawyer, who claimed to have witnessed the scene. It is probably true enough, and its slightly embarrassing features are somehow offset by the survival of another anecdote, this one mentioned by Nettl. In 1907, she and her friend Clara Zetkin (later the “grand old woman” of German Communism) had gone for a walk, lost count of time, and arrived late for an appointment with August Bebel, who had feared they were lost. Rosa then proposed their epitaph: “Here lie the last two men of German Social Democracy”. Seven years later, in February 1914, she had occasion to prove the truth of this cruel joke in a splendid address to the judges of the Criminal Court which had indicted her for “inciting” the masses to civil disobedience in case of war. (Not bad, incidentally, for the woman who “was always wrong” to stand trial on this charge five months before the outbreak of the First World War, which few “serious” people had thought possible). Mr. Nettl with good sense has reprinted the address in its entirety; its “manliness” is unparalleled in the history of German socialism.

It took a few more years and a few more catastrophes for the legend to turn into a symbol of nostalgia for the good old times of the movement, when hopes were green, the revolution around the corner, and, most important, the faith in the capacities of the masses and in the moral integrity of the Socialist or Communist leadership was still intact. It speaks not only for the person of Rosa Luxemburg, but also for the qualities of this older generation of the Left, that the legend – vague, confused, inaccurate in nearly all details – could spread throughout the world and come to life whenever a “New Left” sprang into being. But side by side with this glamorized image, there survived also the old clichés of the “quarrelsome female”, a “romantic” who was neither “realistic” nor scientific (it is true that she was always out of step), and whose works, especially her great book on imperial-[37] ism

(*The Accumulation of Capital*, 1913), were shrugged off. Every New Left movement, when its moment came to change into the Old Left – usually when its members reached the age of forty – promptly buried its early enthusiasm for Rosa Luxemburg together with the dreams of youth; and since they had usually not bothered to read, let alone to understand, what she had to say they found it easy to dismiss her with all the patronizing philistinism of their newly acquired status. “Luxemburgism”, invented posthumously by Party hacks for polemical reasons, has never even achieved the honor of being denounced as “treason”; it was treated as a harmless, infantile disease. Nothing Rosa Luxemburg wrote or said survived except her surprisingly accurate criticism of Bolshevik politics during the early stages of the Russian Revolution, and this only because those whom a “god had failed” could use it as a convenient though wholly inadequate weapon against Stalin. (“There is something indecent in the use of Rosa’s name and writings as a cold war missile”, as the reviewer of Nettl’s book pointed out in the *Times Literary Supplement*). Her new admirers had no more in common with her than her detractors. Her highly developed sense for theoretical differences and her infallible judgment of people, her personal likes and dislikes, would have prevented her lumping Lenin and Stalin together under all circumstances, quite apart from the fact that she had never been a “believer”, had never used politics as a substitute for religion, and had been careful, as Mr. Nettl notes, not to attack religion when she opposed the church. In short, while “revolution was as close and real to her as to Lenin”, it was no more an article of faith with her than Marxism. Lenin was primarily a man of action and would have gone into politics in any event, but she, who in her half-serious self-estimate was born “to mind the geese”, might just as well have buried herself in botany and zoology or history and economics or mathematics, had not the circumstances of the world offended her sense of justice and freedom.

This is of course to admit that she was not an orthodox Marxist, so little orthodox indeed that it might be doubted that she was a Marxist at all. Mr. Nettl rightly states that to her Marx was no [38] more than “the best interpreter of reality of them all”, and it is revealing of her lack of personal commitment that she could write, “I now have a horror of the much praised first volume of Marx’s *Capital* because of its elaborate rococo ornaments à la Hegel”<sup>4</sup>. What mattered most in her view was reality, in all its wonderful and all its frightful aspects, even more than revolution itself. Her unorthodoxy was innocent, non-polemical; she “recommended her friends to read Marx for ‘the daring of his thoughts, the refusal to take anything for granted’, rather than for the value of his conclusions. His mistakes ... were self-evident ... ; that was why [she] never bothered to engage in any lengthy critique”. All this is most obvious in *The Accumulation of Capital*, which only Franz Mehring was unprejudiced enough to call a “truly” magnificent, fascinating achievement without its equal since Marx’s death”<sup>5</sup>. The central thesis of this “curious work of genius” is simple enough. Since capitalism didn’t show any signs of collapse “under the weight of its economic contradictions”, she began to look for an outside cause to explain its continued existence and growth. She found it in the

<sup>4</sup> In a letter to Hans Diefenbach, March 8, 1917, in *Briefe an Freunde*, Zurich 1950.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

so-called third-man theory, that is, in the fact that the process of growth was not merely the consequence of innate laws ruling capitalist production but of the continued existence of pre-capitalist sectors in the country which “capitalism” captured and brought into its sphere of influence. Once this process had spread to the whole national territory, capitalists were forced to look to other parts of the earth, to pre-capitalist lands, to draw them into the process of capital accumulation, which, as it were, fed on whatever was outside itself. In other words, Marx’s “original accumulation of capital” was not, like original sin, a single event, a unique deed of expropriation by the nascent bourgeoisie, setting of a process of accumulation that would then follow “with iron necessity” its own inherent law up to the final collapse. On the contrary, expropriation had to be repeated time and again to keep the system in motion. Hence, capitalism was not a closed system that generated its own con- [39] traditions and was “pregnant with revolution”; it fed on outside factors, and its *automatic* collapse could occur, if at all, only when the whole surface of the earth was conquered and had been devoured.

Lenin was quick to see that this description, whatever its merits or flaws, was essentially non-Marxist. It contradicted the very foundations of Marxian and Hegelian dialectics, which hold that every thesis must create its own anti-thesis—bourgeois society creates the proletariat – so that the movement of the whole process remains bound to the initial factor that caused it. Lenin pointed out that from the viewpoint of materialist dialectics “her thesis that enlarged capitalist reproduction was impossible within a closed economy and needed to cannibalize economies in order to function at all ... [was] a “fundamental error”. The trouble was only that what was an error in abstract Marxian theory was an eminently faithful description of things as they really were. Her careful “description of the torture of Negroes in South Africa” also was clearly “non-Marxist”, but who would deny today that it belonged in a book on imperialism?

## II

Historically, Mr. Nettl’s greatest and most original achievement is the discovery of the Polish-Jewish “peer group” and Rosa Luxemburg’s lifelong, close, and carefully hidden attachment to the Polish party which sprang from it. This is indeed a highly significant and totally neglected source, not of the revolutions, but of the revolutionary spirit in the twentieth century. This milieu, which even in the twenties had lost all public relevance, has now completely disappeared. Its nucleus consisted of assimilated Jews from middle-class families whose cultural background was German (Rosa Luxemburg knew Goethe and Morike by heart, and her literary taste was impeccable, far superior to that of her German friends), whose political formation was Russian, and whose moral standards in both private and public life were uniquely their own. These Jews, an extremely small minority in the East, an even smaller percentage of assimilated Jewry in [40] the West, stood outside all social ranks, Jewish or non-Jewish, hence had no conventional prejudices whatsoever, and had developed, in this truly splendid isolation, their own code of honor – which then attracted a number of non-Jews, among them Julian Marchlewski and Feliks Dzerzhynski, both of whom later joined the Bolsheviks. It was precisely be-

cause of this unique background that Lenin appointed Dzerzhynski as first head of the Cheka, someone, he hoped, no power could corrupt; hadn't he begged to be charged with the department of Children's Education and Welfare?

Nettl rightly stresses Rosa Luxemburg's excellent relations with her family, her parents, brothers, sister, and niece, none of whom ever showed the slightest inclination to socialist convictions or revolutionary activities, yet who did everything they could for her when she had to hide from the police or was in prison. The point is worth making, for it gives us a glimpse of this unique Jewish family background without which the emergence of the ethical code of the peer group would be nearly incomprehensible. The hidden equalizer of those who always treated one another as equals –and hardly anybody else – was the essentially simple experience of a childhood world in which mutual respect and unconditional trust, a universal humanity and a genuine, almost naïve contempt for social and ethnic distinctions were taken for granted. What the members of the peer group had in common was what can only be called moral taste, which is so different from "moral principles"; the authenticity of their morality they owed to having grown up in a world that was not out of joint. This gave them their "rare self-confidence", so unsettling to the world into which they then came, and so bitterly resented as arrogance and conceit. This milieu, and never the German Party, was and remained Rosa Luxemburg's home. The home was movable up to a point, and since it was predominantly Jewish it did not coincide with any "fatherland".

It is of course highly suggestive that the SDKIP. (Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, formerly called SDPK, Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland), the party of this predominantly Jewish group, split from the official Socialist [41] Polish Party, the PPS, because of the latter's stand for Polish independence (Pilsudski, the Fascist dictator of Poland after World War I, was its most famous and successful offspring), and that, after the split, the members of the group became ardent defenders of an often doctrinaire internationalism. It is even more suggestive that the national question is the only issue on which one could accuse Rosa Luxemburg of self-deception and unwillingness to face reality. That this had something to do with her Jewishness is undeniable, although it is of course "lamentably absurd" to discover in her anti-nationalism "a peculiarly Jewish quality". Mr. Nettl, while hiding nothing, is rather careful to avoid the "Jewish question", and in view of the usually low level of debates on this issue one can only applaud his decision. Unfortunately, his understandable distaste has blinded him to the few important facts in this matter, which is all the more to be regretted since these facts, though of a simple, elementary nature, also escaped the otherwise so sensitive and alert mind of Rosa Luxemburg.

The first of these is what only Nietzsche, as far as I know, has ever pointed out, namely, that the position and functions of the Jewish people in Europe predestined them to become the "good Europeans" *par excellence*. The Jewish middle classes of Paris and London, Berlin and Vienna, Warsaw and Moscow, were in fact neither cosmopolitan nor international, though the intellectuals among them thought of themselves in these terms. They were European, something that could be said of no other group. And this was not a matter of conviction; it was an objective fact. In other words, while the self-deception of assimilated Jews usually consisted in the

mistaken belief that they were just as German as the Germans, just as French as the French, the self-deception of the intellectual Jews consisted in thinking that they had no “fatherland”, for their fatherland actually was Europe. There is, second, the fact that at least the East-European intelligentsia was multilingual – Rosa Luxemburg herself spoke Polish, Russian, German, and French fluently and knew English and Italian very well. They never quite understood the importance of language barriers and why the slogan, “The fatherland of the working class is the Socialist movement”, should be so disastrously wrong [42] precisely for the working classes. It is indeed more than a little disturbing that Rosa Luxemburg herself, with her acute sense of reality and strict avoidance of clichés, should not have *heard* what was wrong with the slogan on principle. A fatherland, after all, is most of all a “land”; an organization is not a country, not even metaphorically. There is indeed grim justice in the later transformation of the slogan, “The fatherland of the working class is Soviet Russia” – Russia was at least a “land” – which put an end to the utopian internationalism of this generation.

One could adduce more such facts, and it still would be difficult to claim that Rosa Luxemburg was entirely wrong on the national question. What, after all, has contributed more to the catastrophic decline of Europe than the insane nationalism which accompanied the decline of the nation state in the era of imperialism? Those whom Nietzsche had called the “good Europeans” – a very small minority even among Jews – might well have been the only ones to have a presentiment of the disastrous consequences ahead, although they were unable to gauge correctly the enormous force of nationalist feeling in a decaying body politic.

### III

Closely connected with the discovery of the Polish “peer group” and its continued importance for Rosa Luxemburg’s public and private life is Mr. Nettl’s disclosure of hitherto inaccessible sources, which enabled him to piece together the facts of her life – “the exquisite business of love and living”. It is now clear that we knew next to nothing about her private life for the simple reason that she had so carefully protected herself from notoriety. This is no mere matter of sources. It was fortunate indeed that the new material fell into Mr. Nettl’s hands, and he has every right to dismiss his few predecessors who were less hampered by lack of access to the facts than by their inability to move, think, and feel on the same level as their subject. The ease with which Nettl handles his biographical material is astounding. His treatment is more than perceptive. His is the first plausible portrait [43] of this extraordinary woman, drawn *con amore*, with tact and great delicacy. It is as though she had found her last admirer, and it is for this reason that one feels like quarreling with some of his judgments.

He is certainly wrong in emphasizing her ambition, and sense of career. Does he think that her violent contempt for the careerists and status seekers in the German Party – their delight in being admitted to the Reichstag – is mere cant? Does he believe that a really “ambitious” person could have afforded to be as generous as she was? (Once, at an international congress, Jaures finished an eloquent speech in which he “ridiculed the misguided passions of Rosa Luxemburg, [but] there was

suddenly no one to translate him. Rosa jumped up and reproduced the moving oratory: from French into equally telling German"). And how can he reconcile this, except by assuming dishonesty or self-deception, with her telling phrase in one of her letters to Jogiches:

"I have a cursed longing for happiness and am ready to haggle for my daily portion of happiness with all the stubbornness of a mule". What he mistakes for ambition is the natural force of a temperament capable, in her own laughing words, of "setting a prairie on fire", which propelled her almost willy-nilly into public affairs, and even ruled over most of her purely intellectual enterprises. While he stresses repeatedly the high moral standards of the "peer group", he still seems not to understand that such things as ambition, career, status, and even mere success were under the strictest taboo.

There is another aspect of her personality which Nettel stresses but whose implications he seems not to understand: that she was so "self-consciously a woman". This in itself put certain limitations on whatever her ambitions otherwise might have been for Nettel does not ascribe to her more than what would have been natural in a man with her gifts and opportunities. Her distaste for the women's emancipation movement, to which all other women of her generation and political convictions were irresistibly drawn, was significant; in the face of suffragette equality, she might have been tempted to reply, *Vive la petite différence*. She was an outsider, not only because she was and remained a Polish [44] Jew in a country she disliked and a party she came soon to despise, but also because she was a woman. Mr. Nettel must, of course, be pardoned for his masculine prejudices; they would not matter much if they had not prevented him from understanding fully the role Leo Jogiches, her husband for all practical purposes and her first, perhaps her only, lover, played in her life. Their deadly serious quarrel, caused by Jogiches's brief affair with another woman and endlessly complicated by Rosa's furious reaction, was typical of their time and milieu, as was the aftermath, his jealousy and her refusal for years to forgive him. This generation still believed firmly that love strikes only once, and its carelessness with marriage certificates should not be mistaken for any belief in free love. Mr. Nettel's evidence shows that she had friends and admirers, and that she enjoyed this, but it hardly indicates that there was ever another man in her life. To believe in the Party gossip about marriage plans with "Hänschen" Diefenbach, whom she addressed as *Sie* and never dreamed of treating as an equal, strikes me as downright silly. Nettel calls the story of Leo Jogiches and Rosa Luxemburg "one of the great and tragic love stories of Socialism", and there is no need to quarrel with this verdict if one understands that it was not "blind and self-destructive jealousy" which caused the ultimate tragedy in their relations but war and the years in prison, the doomed German revolution and the bloody end.

Leo Jogiches, whose name Nettel also has rescued from oblivion, was a very remarkable and yet typical figure among the professional revolutionists. To Rosa Luxemburg, he was definitely *masculini generis*, which was of considerable importance to her: She preferred Graf Westarp (the leader of the German Conservative Party) to all the German Socialist luminaries "because", she said, "he is a man". There were few people she respected, and Jogiches headed a list on which only the names of Lenin and Franz Mehring could be inscribed with certainty. He

definitely was a man of action and passion, he knew how to do and how to suffer. It is tempting to compare him with Lenin, whom he somewhat resembles, except in his passion for anonymity and for pulling strings behind the scenes, and his love of conspiracy and [45] danger, which must have given him an additional erotic charm. He was indeed a Lenin *manqué*, even in his inability to write, “total” in his case (as she observed in a shrewd and actually very loving portrait in one of her letters), and his mediocrity as a public speaker. Both men had great talent for organization and leadership, but for nothing else, so that they felt impotent and superfluous when there was nothing to do and they were left to themselves. This is less noticeable in Lenin’s case because he was never completely isolated, but Jogiches had early fallen out with the Russian Party because of a quarrel with Plekhanov – the Pope of the Russian emigration in Switzerland during the nineties – who regarded the self-assured Jewish youth newly arrived from Poland as “a miniature version of Nechaieff”. The consequence was that he, according to Rosa Luxemburg, “completely rootless, vegetated” for many years, until the revolution of 1905 gave him his first opportunity: “Quite suddenly he not only achieved the position of leader of the Polish movement, but even in the Russian”. (The SDKPIL came into prominence during the Revolution and became more important in the years following. Jogiches, though he himself didn’t “write a single line”, remained “none the less the very soul” of its publications.) He had his last brief moment when, “completely unknown in the SPD”, he organized a clandestine opposition in the German army during the First World War. “Without him there would have been no *Spartakusbund*”, which, unlike any other organized Leftist group in Germany, for a short time became a kind of “ideal peer group”. (This, of course, is not to say that Jogiches made the German revolution; like all revolutions, it was made by no one. *Spartakusbund* too was “following rather than making events”, and the official notion that the “Spartakus uprising” in January 1918 was caused or inspired by its leaders – Rosa Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Jogiches – is a myth.)

We shall never know how many of Rosa Luxemburg’s political ideas derived from Jogiches; in marriage, it is not always easy to tell the partners’ thoughts apart. But that he failed where Lenin succeeded was at least as much a consequence of circumstances – he was a Jew and a Pole – as of lesser stature. In any [46] event, Rosa Luxemburg would have been the last to hold this against him. The members of the peer group did not judge one another in these categories. Jogiches himself might have agreed with Eugene Leviné, also a Russian Jew though a younger man, “We are dead men on furlough”. This mood is what set him apart from the others; for neither Lenin nor Trotsky nor Rosa Luxemburg herself is likely to have thought along such lines. After her death he refused to leave Berlin for safety: “Somebody has to stay to write all our epitaphs”. He was arrested two months after the murder of Liebknecht and Luxemburg and shot in the back in the police station. The name of the murderer was known, but “no attempt to punish him was ever made”; he killed another man in the same way, and then continued his “career with promotion in the Prussian Police”. Such were the mores of the Weimar Republic...

Reading and remembering these old stories, one becomes painfully aware of the difference between the German comrades and the members of the peer group. During the Russian revolution of 1905 Rosa Luxemburg was arrested in Warsaw, and

her friends collected the money for bail (probably provided by the German Party). The payment was supplemented “with an unofficial threat of reprisal; if anything happened to Rosa they would retaliate with action against prominent officials”. No such notion of “action” ever entered her German friends’ minds either before or after the wave of political murders when the impunity of such deeds had become notorious.

#### IV

More troubling in retrospect, certainly more painful for herself, than her alleged “errors” are the few crucial instances in which Rosa Luxemburg was not out of step, but appeared instead to be in agreement with the official powers in the German Social Democratic Party. These were her real mistakes, and there was none she did not finally recognize and bitterly regret.

The least harmful among them concerned the national question. She had arrived in Germany in 1898 from Zürich, where she [47] had passed her doctorate, with a first-class dissertation about the industrial development of Poland” (according to Professor Julius Wolf, who in his autobiography still remembered fondly “the ablest of my pupils”), which achieved the unusual “distinction of instant commercial publication” and is still used by students of Polish history. Her thesis was that the economic growth of Poland depended entirely upon the Russian market and that any attempt “to form a national or linguistic state was a negation of all development and progress for the last fifty years”. (That she was economically right was more than demonstrated by the chronic malaise of Poland between the wars.) She then became the expert on Poland for the German Party, its propagandist among the Polish population in the Eastern German provinces, and entered an uneasy alliance with people who wished to “Germanize” the Poles out of existence and would “gladly make you a present of all and every Pole including Polish Socialism”, as an SPD secretary told her. Surely, “the glow of official approval was for Rosa a false glow”.

Much more serious was her deceptive agreement with Party authorities in the revisionist controversy in which she played a leading part. This famous debate had been touched off by Eduard Bernstein<sup>6</sup> and has gone down in history as the alternative of reform against revolution. But this battle cry is misleading for two reasons: it makes it appear as though the SPD at the turn of the century still was committed to revolution, which was not the case; and it conceals the objective soundness of much of what Bernstein had to say. His criticism of Marx’s economic theories was indeed, as he claimed, in full “agreement with reality”. He pointed out that the “enormous increase of social wealth [was] not accompanied by a decreasing number of large capitalists but by an increasing number of capitalists of all degrees”, that an “increasing narrowing of the circle of the well-to-do and an increasing misery of the poor” had failed to materialize, that “the modern proletarian [was] indeed

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<sup>6</sup> His most important book is now available in English under the title *Evolutionary Socialism* (Schocken Paperback), unfortunately lacking much needed annotations and an introduction for the American reader.

poor but that he [was] no [48] pauper”, and that Marx’s slogan, “The proletariat has no fatherland”, was not true. Universal suffrage had given him political rights, the trade unions a place in society, and the new imperialist development a clear stake in the nation’s foreign policy. No doubt the reaction of the German Party to these unwelcome truths was chiefly inspired by a deep-seated reluctance to reexamine critically its theoretical foundation, but this reluctance was greatly sharpened by the Party’s vested interest in the status quo threatened by Bernstein’s analysis. What was at stake was the status of the SPD as a “state within a state”: the Party had in fact become a huge and well-organized bureaucracy that stood outside society and had every interest in things as they were. Revisionism à la Bernstein would have led the Party back into German society, and such “integration” was felt to be as dangerous to the Party’s interests as a revolution.

Mr. Nettl holds an interesting theory about the “pariah position” of the SPD within German society and its failure to participate in government<sup>7</sup>. It seemed to its members that the Party could “provide within itself a superior alternative to corrupt capitalism”. In fact, by keeping the “defenses against society on all fronts intact”, it generated that spurious feeling of “togetherness” (as Nettl puts it) which the French Socialists treated with great contempt<sup>8</sup>. In any event, it was obvious that the more the Party increased in numbers, the more surely was its radical élan “organized out of existence”. One could live very comfortably in this “state within a state” by avoiding friction with society at large, by enjoying feelings of moral superiority without any consequences. It was not even necessary to pay the price of serious alienation since this pariah society was in fact but a mirror image [49], a “miniature reflection” of German society at large. This blind alley of the German Socialist movement could be analyzed correctly from opposing points of view – either from the view of Bernstein’s revisionism, which recognized the emancipation of the working classes within capitalist society as an accomplished fact and demanded a stop to the talk about a revolution nobody thought of anyhow; or from the viewpoint of those who were not merely “alienated” from bourgeois society but actually wanted to change the world.

The latter was the standpoint of the revolutionists from the East who led the attack against Bernstein – Plekhanov, Parvus, and Rosa Luxemburg – and whom Karl Kautsky, the German Party’s most eminent theoretician, supported, although he probably felt much more at ease with Bernstein than in the company of his new allies from abroad. The victory they won was Pyrrhic; it “merely strengthened alienation by pushing reality away”. For the real issue was not theoretical and not economic. At stake was Bernstein’s conviction, shamefully hidden in a footnote, that “the middle class – not excepting the German – in their bulk [was] still fairly healthy, not only economically but also *morally*” (my italics). This was the reason

<sup>7</sup> See “The German Social Democratic Party, 1890-1914, as a Political Model”, in *Past and Present*, April 1965.

<sup>8</sup> The situation bore very similar traits to the position of the French army during the Dreyfus crisis in France which Rosa Luxemburg so brilliantly analyzed for *Die Neue Zeit* in “Die Soziale Krise in Frankreich” (vol 1, 1901). “The reason the army was reluctant to make a move was that it wanted to show its opposition to the civil power of the republic, without at the same time losing the force of that opposition by committing itself”, through a serious *coup d’état*, to another form of government.

that Plekhanov called him a “philistine” and that Parvus and Rosa Luxemburg thought the fight so decisive for the future of the Party. For the truth of the matter was that Bernstein and Kautsky had in common their aversion to revolution; the “iron law of necessity” was for Kautsky the best possible excuse for doing nothing. The guests from Eastern Europe were the only ones who not merely “believed” in revolution as a theoretical necessity but wished to do something about it, precisely because they considered society as it was to be unbearable on moral grounds, on the grounds of justice. Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg, on the other hand, had in common that they were both honest (which may explain Bernstein’s “secret tenderness” for her), analyzed what they saw, were loyal to reality and critical of Marx; Bernstein was aware of this and shrewdly remarks in his reply to Rosa Luxemburg’s attacks that she too had questioned the whole Marxist predictions of the [50] coming social evolution, so far as this is based on the theory of crises.

Rosa Luxemburg’s early triumphs in the German Party rested on a double misunderstanding. At the turn of the century the SPD was “the envy and admiration of Socialists throughout the world”. August Bebel, its “grand old man”, who from Bismarck’s foundation of the German Reich to the outbreak of the First World War dominated [its] policy and spirit”, had always proclaimed, “I am and always will be the mortal enemy of existing society”. Didn’t that sound like the spirit of the Polish peer group? Couldn’t one assume from such proud defiance that the great German Party was somehow the SDKIL writ large? It took Rosa Luxemburg almost a decade – until she returned from the first Russian revolution – to discover that the secret of this defiance was willful noninvolvement with the world at large and single-minded preoccupation with the growth of the Party organization. Out of this experience she developed, after 1910, her program of constant “friction” with society without which, as she then realized, the very source of the revolutionary spirit was doomed to dry up. She did not intend to spend her life in a sect, no matter how large; her commitment to revolution was primarily a moral matter, and this meant that she remained passionately engaged in public life and civil affairs, in the destinies of the world. Her involvement with European politics outside the immediate interests of the working class, and hence completely beyond the horizon of all Marxists, appears most convincingly in her repeated insistence on a “republican program” for the German and Russian Parties.

This was one of the main points of her famous *Juniusbroschüre*, written in prison during the war and then used as the platform for the *Spartakusbund*. Lenin, who was unaware of its authorship, immediately declared that to proclaim “the program of a republic...[means] in practice to proclaim the revolution – with an *incorrect* revolutionary program”. Well, a year later the Russian Revolution broke out without any “program” whatsoever, and its first achievement was the abolition of the monarchy and the [51] establishment of a republic, and the same was to happen in Germany and Austria. Which, of course, has never prevented the Russian, Polish, or German comrades from violently disagreeing with her on this point it is indeed the republican question rather than the national one which separated her most decisively from all others. Here she was completely alone, as she was alone, though less obviously so, in her stress on the absolute necessity of not only individual but public freedom under all circumstances.

A second misunderstanding is directly connected with the revisionist debate. Rosa Luxemburg mistook Kautsky's reluctance to accept Bernstein's analyses for an authentic commitment to revolution. After the first Russian revolution in 1905, for which she had hurried back to Warsaw with false papers, she could no longer deceive herself. To her, these months constituted not only a crucial experience, they were also "the happiest of my life". Upon her return, she tried to discuss the events with her friends in the German Party. She learned quickly that the word "revolution" "had only to come into contact with areal revolutionary situation to break down" into meaningless syllables. The German Socialists were convinced that such things could happen only in distant barbarian lands. This was the first shock, from which she never recovered. The second came in 1914 and brought her near to suicide.

Naturally, her first contact with a real revolution taught her more and better things than disillusion and the fine arts of disdain and mistrust. Out of it came her insight into the nature of political action, which Mr. Nettl rightly calls her most important contribution to political theory. The main point is that she had learned from the revolutionary workers' councils (the latter *soviets*) that "good organization does not precede action but is the product of it", that "the organization of revolutionary action can and must be learnt in revolution itself, as one can only learn swimming in the water", that revolutions are "made" by nobody but break out "spontaneously", and that "the pressure for action" always comes "from below". A revolution is "great and strong as long as the Social Democrats [at the time still the only revolutionary party] don't smash it up". [52]

There were, however, two aspects of the 1905 prelude which entirely escaped her. There was, after all, the surprising fact that the revolution had broken out not only in a non-industrialized, backward country, but in a territory where no strong socialist movement with mass support existed at all. And there was, second, the equally undeniable fact that the revolution had been the consequence of the Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. These were the two facts Lenin never forgot and from which he drew two conclusions. First, one did not need a large organization; a small, tightly organized group with a leader who knew what he wanted was enough to pick up the power once the authority of the old regime had been swept away. Large revolutionary organizations were only a nuisance. And, second, since revolutions were not "made" but were the result of circumstances and events beyond anybody's power, wars were welcome<sup>9</sup>. The second point was the source of her disagreements with Lenin during the First World War; the first of her criticism of Lenin's tactics in the Russian Revolution of 1918. For she refused categorically, from beginning to end, to see in the war anything but the most terrible disaster, no matter what its eventual outcome; the price in human lives, especially in proletarian lives, was too high in any event. Moreover, it would have gone against her grain to look upon revolution as the profiteer of war and massacre – something which

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<sup>9</sup> Lenin read Clausewitz' *Vom Kriege* (1832) during First World War; his excerpts and annotations were published in East Berlin during the fifties. According to Werner Hahlberg "Lenin und Clausewitz" – in the *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, vol 36, Berlin, 1954 – Lenin was under the influence of Clausewitz when he began to consider the possibility that war, the collapse of the European system of nation states, might replace the economic collapse of capitalist economy as predicted by Marx.

didn't bother Lenin in the least. And with respect to the issue of organization, she did not believe in a victory in which the people at large had no part and no voice; so little, indeed, did she believe in holding power at any price that she "was far more afraid of a deformed revolution than an unsuccessful one" – this was, in fact, "the major difference between her" and the Bolsheviks.

And haven't events proved her right? Isn't the history of the Soviet Union one long demonstration of the frightful dangers of "deformed revolutions"? Hasn't the "moral collapse" which she [53] foresaw – without, of course, foreseeing the open criminality of Lenin's successor – done more harm to the cause of revolution as she understood it than "any and every political defeat ... in honest struggle against superior forces and in the teeth of the historical situation" could possibly have done? Wasn't it true that Lenin was "completely mistaken" in the means he employed, that the only way to salvation was the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion", and that terror "demoralized" everybody and destroyed everything?

She did not live long enough to see how right she had been and to watch the terrible and terribly swift moral deterioration of the Communist parties, the direct offspring of the Russian Revolution, throughout the world. Nor for that matter did Lenin, who despite all his mistakes still had more in common with the original peer group than with anybody who came after him. This became manifest when Paul Levi, the successor of Leo Jogiches in the leadership of the *Spartakusbund*, three years after Rosa Luxemburg's death, published her remarks on the Russian Revolution just quoted, which she had written in 1918 "only for you" – that is, without intending publication<sup>10</sup>. "It was a moment of considerable embarrassment for both the German and Russian parties, and Lenin could be forgiven had he answered sharply and immoderately. Instead, he wrote: "We answer with ... a good old Russian fable: an eagle can sometimes fly lower than a chicken, but a chicken can never rise to the same heights as an eagle. Rosa Luxemburg ... in spite of [her] mistakes ... was [54] and is an eagle". He then went on to demand publication of "her biography and the complete edition of her works", unpurged of "error", and chided the German comrades for their "incredible" negligence in this duty. This was in 1922. Three years later, Lenin's successors had decided to "Bolshevize" the German Communist Party and therefore ordered a "specific onslaught on Rosa Luxemburg's whole legacy". The task was accepted with joy by a young member named Ruth Fischer, who had just arrived from Vienna. She told the German comrades that Rosa Luxemburg and her influence "were nothing less than a syphilis bacillus".

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<sup>10</sup> It is not without irony that this pamphlet is the only work of hers which is still read and quoted today. The following items are available in English: *The Accumulation of Capital*, London and Yale, 1951; the responses to Bernstein (1899) in an edition published by the Three Arrows Press, New York, 1937; the *Juniusbroschüre* (1918) under the title *The Crisis in the German Social Democracy* by the Lanka Sama Samaja Publications of Colombo, Ceylon, in 1955, apparently in mimeographed form, and originally published in 1918 by the Socialist Publication Society, New York. In 1953, the same publishing house in Ceylon brought out her *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions* (1906).

The gutter had opened, and out of it emerged what Rosa Luxemburg would have called “another zoological species”. No “agents of the bourgeoisie” and no “Socialist traitors” were needed any longer to destroy the few survivors of the peer group and to bury in oblivion the last remnants of their spirit. No complete edition of her works, needless to say, was ever published. After World War II, a two-volume edition of selections “with careful annotations underlining her errors” came out in East Berlin and was followed by a “full-length analysis of the Luxemburgist system of errors” by Fred Oelssner, which quickly “lapsed into obscurity” because it became “too Stalinist”. This most certainly was not what Lenin had demanded, nor could it, as he had hoped, serve “in the education of many generations of Communists”.

After Stalin’s death, things began to change, though not in East Germany, where, characteristically, revision of Stalinist history took the form of a “Bebel cult” (The only one to protest this new nonsense was poor old Hermann Duncker, the last distinguished survivor who still could “recall the most wonderful period of my life, when as a young man I knew and worked with Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and Franz Mehring”). The Poles, however, although their own two-volume edition of selected works in 1959 is “partly overlapping with the German” one, “took out her reputation almost unaltered from the casket in which it had been stored” ever since Lenin’s death, and after 1956 a “flood of Polish publications” on the subject appeared on the market. One would like to believe that there is still hope for a belated recognition of [55] who she was and what she did, as one would like to hope that she will finally find her place in the education of political scientists in the countries of the West. For Mr. Nettl is right: “Her ideas belong wherever the history of political ideas is seriously taught”.