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Proletarian Revolution and the Mass Strike

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ROSA LUXEMBURG, a militant Marxist and an active participant in the Russian, Polish and German Social Democratic Parties during the Second International, rejected a minority seizure of power as alien to the Social Democratic tradition. Such a strategy, she believed, was not Marxism but Blanquism. How, then, did she propose to achieve the Marxist goal of the "proletarian seizure of state power," an end which, she protested, the Revisionist Bernstein had completely abandoned? Her solution was the "political mass strike."² This strategy consisted of a series of prolonged proletarian challenges to the capitalist order, the momentum of which would "spontaneously" prepare the proletariat to take power and to establish its class dictatorship.

Even before the 1905 Russian Revolution Rosa Luxemburg had been an advocate of the mass strike. She had studied carefully and commented extensively on the experience of the general strike movement in France and Belgium. In Belgium a general strike in 1891 (involving 150,000 workers) failed to secure universal suffrage, but a second strike in 1893 (involving 250,000 workers) did secure a wider franchise. In 1902 the Belgian Labor Party, acting with the Liberals, launched a general strike involving 350,000 workers, but the Liberals withdrew their support at the crucial moment and the strike failed. Those members (especially the conservative trade union leaders) of the SPD (the German Social Democratic Party) who opposed the general strike as *Generalunsinn* ("General Nonsense") said that this failure showed the impracticality of this form of the class struggle. Rosa Luxemburg, a leader of the radical wing of the SPD, diametrically opposed this view. She contended that the leaders of the Belgian proletariat erred

¹ The author is with the Institute for Sino-Soviet Studies at the George Washington University. He wishes to thank the Ford Foundation and the University of California Faculty Research Grant Committee for their generous support of the larger study of which this article is a part.

² See Rosa Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke, IV: Gewerkschaftskampf und Massenstreik*. Edited by Paul Frölich (Berlin: Vereinigung Internationaler Verlags-Anstalten, 1928), *passim*. This work will be cited as *G.W.*, IV, with the appropriate page number.

not in initiating this strike, but in allowing—through an “exaggerated legalism” (a remark reminiscent of Marx’s judgment on the Paris Commune)—the alliance with the Liberals to cripple the revolutionary movement.³ In commenting on the central reason that the 1902 Belgian general strike failed, Rosa concluded:

A general strike pledged to remain within strict, legal limits is like a military demonstration with unloaded guns. The “Hands-in-the-Pockets” slogan issued by the *Peuple* [the organ of the Belgian Labor Party] will frighten no one, and certainly not a class fighting to maintain its political domination. The strikes of the Belgian workers in 1891 and 1893 were sufficient to break down the resistance of the clerical reactionaries, but only because the latter had good reason to fear that if they did not give way violent unrest would follow and the strike movement would take a revolutionary turn. This time [1902], too, it might have been quite unnecessary to use actual violence to attain the desired end—if only the leaders had not solemnly ejected all their cartridges in advance, turned the military demonstration into a pleasant Sunday afternoon parade, and foregone the thunder of the general strike for the fizzing of a damp squid.

It was her experience in the 1905–1906 Russian Revolution that led Luxemburg to develop an extended theory of the mass strike (in her work *The Mass Strike, the Party and the Trade Unions*),⁴ a phenomenon which she believed was a new historical development, a new means of conducting the class struggle. In her analysis of the mass strike she attempted to distinguish sharply between her concept of the “political mass strike” and the anarchists’ theory of the “general strike.” She agreed that Engels’ 1873 polemic⁵ against the Spanish Bakuninists’ call for a general strike had been correct at the time and was still a valid argument against those socialists who naively sought to topple the capitalist order at one blow. For Rosa denied that capitalism could be overcome all at once. Instead the struggle would be a long and arduous one, full of many “premature defeats,” setbacks which were only temporary and which fulfilled the necessary historical role of rousing proletarian consciousness. (In *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin had similarly argued, “And the revolution itself must not by any means be regarded as a single act . . . but as a series of more or less powerful outbreaks rapidly alternating with more or less intense calm.”)⁶ In the same manner Marx had

³ “Der Generalstreik” [part of “Und zum dritten Mal das belgische Experiment”], *G.W.*, IV, 359.

⁴ *Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften* (Hamburg: E. Dubber, 1906). This study uses the edition included in Rosa Luxemburg’s *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1955), I, 155–257.

⁵ For Engels’ attack on the Spanish Bakuninists’ advocacy of the “general strike,” see his article “Die Bakuninisten an der Arbeit. Denkschrift über den Aufstand in Spanien im Sommer 1873” [written September–October, 1873], in Marx and Engels, *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1962), XVIII, 476–493.

⁶ Lenin, *Sochineniia* (Moscow: Gosizdatpolitlit, 1960), VI, 177.

defended the positive aspect of the revolutionary example of the Paris Commune (in contrast to the German Revisionist Vollmar who later declared that it would have been better if the Communards had "stayed in bed"), despite its defeat for the working class. Like Marx and Luxemburg, Lenin praised the abortive December 1905 Moscow Uprising and castigated Plekhanov's condemnation of it.

Rosa Luxemburg had already emphasized the necessity of "premature defeats" in her polemic against Eduard Bernstein. In this work she sarcastically observed that Bernstein's warning to the proletariat not to take power "prematurely" was simply advice for the working class to "go to sleep" (*i.e.*, a condemnation of the proletariat to passive treason to its cause).⁷ She argued that a revolution as profound as the transformation from the capitalist to the socialist order was unthinkable "through one conquering blow of the proletariat." To imagine this possible was not Marxism but Blanquism. In opposition to Bernstein's cautionary advice on proletarian strategy and tactics, Luxemburg maintained that "Thus it happens that the first time, from the point of view of the final result of the entire struggle, the proletariat will necessarily arrive 'too early' at [political] power." And in her very last article, "Order Reigns in Berlin," Rosa defended the positive role of the doomed Spartacus Uprising:

From this contradiction between the sharpening of the task and the lack of preliminary conditions for its solution in the initial phases of the revolutionary development, results the fact that the partial struggles of the revolution formally end in *defeat*. The revolution is the only form of "war"—and this is its special law—in which the final victory can be prepared only by a series of "defeats" . . . Revolutions have brought us until now only defeats, but these unavoidable defeats accumulate guarantee on guarantee of a future victory . . . And, therefore, the future victory will spring from this "defeat."⁸

Luxemburg argued that the anarchists and the opportunists both erred in viewing the mass strike in the abstract, as a predetermined, mechanically planned device that could be instituted at any time and at any place, given only the determined will of a small minority. This misconception of the role of the mass strike, she asserted, was the basis of the erroneous belief

⁷ "Sozialreform oder Revolution?" in Rosa Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke*, III: *Gegen den Reformismus*. Edited by Paul Frölich (Berlin: Vereinigung Internationaler Verlags-Anstalten, 1923), p. 90.

⁸ "Die Ordnung herrscht in Berlin" (first published in *Die Rote Fabne*, No. 14 [January 14, 1919]), in Rosa Luxemburg, *Ich war, ich bin, ich werde sein! Artikel und Reden zur Novemberrevolution*. Edited by the Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim Zentralkomitee der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1958), pp. 140, 141, 143.

that there could be a general strike against war—as the Brussels (1868) Congress of the First International had maintained and as the Dutch pacifist Domela Nieuwenhuis had proposed at Congresses of the (Second) Socialist International for the past decade.⁹ In this rare instance Rosa Luxemburg was more realistic than her personal (though not her political) friend Jean Jaurès who, in his passionate desire to avoid a European war, was willing to contemplate all means (even such an unrealistic one as a general strike) in an attempt to prevent the holocaust.

During the debates in the SPD in 1905–1906 over the lessons of the Russian Revolution some of the leading Revisionists (Bernstein, Friedrich Stampfer and Kurt Eisner) endorsed the mass strike, but, as Rosa caustically pointed out, as a substitute for revolution.

Luxemburg maintained that the “political mass strike” did not depend upon prior planning or even upon prior propagandizing of the idea. In her speech before the Frankfurt Criminal Court on February 14, 1914 (at her trial for inciting German soldiers to military disobedience), Rosa declared:

The mass strikes are a stage of the class struggle, to which everything in the present development leads with absolute necessity. Our [Social Democracy’s] entire task in relation to it [the mass strike] consists in bringing this tendency of the development of the working class to consciousness in order that the workers through a comprehension of their tasks may be an instructed, disciplined, mature, determined and energetic popular mass.¹⁰

Luxemburg pointed to Russia where there had been virtually no discussion of the mass strike, and yet this tactic had been enormously successful during the (1905) revolution¹¹ (which Rosa Luxemburg—along with a majority of the Russian Social Democrats—believed was still going on when she wrote her study of the mass strike). Mass strikes did not “cause” revolutions but were an integral function of the revolutionary process. The mass strikes in Russia were not a substitute for or an escape from political activity, but rather served to create the necessary preconditions (parliamentarism, etc.) for the emancipation of the proletariat from the capitalist mode of production.

Consistency was not exactly Rosa’s forte (in her defense she could have cited Emerson’s dictum about a “foolish consistency”), and her writings on the mass strike were no exception. In 1902, in an article for *Die Neue Zeit* (the leading German Marxist theoretical organ, edited by her friend Karl

⁹ “Der Generalstreik,” *G.W.*, IV, 356.

¹⁰ “Militarismus, Krieg und Arbeiterklasse,” in Rosa Luxemburg, *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1955), II, 503.

¹¹ “Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften,” in *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften*, I, 165.

Kautsky), she argued that the “decisive” reason that the mass strike could succeed in Belgium was because in that country (more so than in Germany or in France) there was a certain amount of freedom to make coalitions and of democratic customs (*ein bestimmtes Mass der Koalitionsfreiheit und der demokratischen Sitten*).¹² But what had been the “decisive factor” for Belgium in 1902 was certainly not of the same importance for Russia in 1905 where, she reasoned, the mass strikes had succeeded largely because of the unorganized (*i.e.*, backward) nature of the Russian working class.¹³ Rosa explicitly recognized that the mass strikes had been most successful among the unorganized Russian workers, and she predicted that the same would be the case in Germany.

This was a dominant theme in her analysis of the mass strike: the importance of the unorganized masses for the spontaneous development of the revolution. Her enthusiasm for “unorganized” and “spontaneous” proletarian development was closely related to her distaste for all organization as inherently “bureaucratic” and conservative. It was for this reason that, in a 1904 article published jointly in *Die Neue Zeit* and the “new” (Menshevik) *Iskra*, she attacked Lenin’s apotheosis of professionalism and specialization in the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party in his pamphlet *One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward*. In *The Mass Strike, the Party and the Trade Unions* Luxemburg rejected the “rigid, mechanistic-bureaucratic conception which regards the [class] struggle only as a product of an organization.” To this attitude she contrasted, “The living dialectical development which recognizes, on the contrary, that organization arises as a product of the [class] struggle.” Certainly Rosa Luxemburg’s own experience in the SPD—that of a radical frustrated by conservative functionaries in both the Party and in the trade unions—was a critical factor in inducing her to devise a strategy which would avoid bureaucracy and maintain a revolutionary “spontaneity.”

Luxemburg’s study of the mass strike brilliantly captured the mood of anarchic confusion and elemental energy of the 1905–1906 Russian Revolution, the dress rehearsal for 1917. Rosa’s description of the Russian Revolution of 1905 was extremely perceptive—as was her portrayal, in her “Junius” brochure, of the mood of despair during the First World War that followed the initial wave of patriotic enthusiasm.¹⁴

But how correct was her analysis of proletarian revolution? In her exten-

¹² “Der Generalstreik,” in *G.W.*, IV, 357.

¹³ “Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften,” in *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften*, I, 219.

¹⁴ “Die Krise der Sozialdemokratie (Junius-Broschüre)” [originally, 1916], in *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften*, I, 258–259.

sive writings Rosa argued over and over that revolutions could not be “made” at any time and place chosen by a small, “conscious” minority. But are revolutions always “spontaneous”? Can a small band of revolutionaries never “make” them according to a predetermined plan? (In contrast to Luxemburg, Lenin desired “an organization of revolutionaries, as an essential factor in ‘making’ the revolution.”)

Rosa Luxemburg’s theory of “spontaneity” would seem to explain important aspects of some vital twentieth-century political events. “Spontaneity” was a crucial factor in the 1905 Russian Revolution, in the 1917 Russian Revolution (during its early stages until Lenin seized power as it “lay in the streets” of Petrograd), in the East Berlin Uprising of June 1953, and in the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. But, although modern revolutions are often “spontaneously” generated at the outset, to retain power and guide the “spontaneity” of the revolution, a Leninist-type party is required. Otherwise revolutions fail for want of political direction. Castro’s amorphous “Twenty-Sixth of July” movement could topple the hated and inept Batista from power, but only a totalitarian party structure, Fidel correctly concluded, could allow him to maintain power, crush all opposition, and effect revolutionary social changes. And it was “not an accident” that the Constitution of Ghana under the recently deposed Nkrumah closely followed Article 126 (the official recognition of the one-party state) of the Constitution of the USSR.

Luxemburg’s theory of “spontaneity” was not “wrong,” but merely presented an incomplete analysis of revolution. “Spontaneity” plays a very important role in revolutionary upheavals, but “spontaneity” is, by definition, anti-organizational and, therefore, cannot provide a structuring of political power. Such an organizational structure Marx did not provide, aside from his few references to the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and his pronouncements on revolutionary strategy and tactics while he was editor of *Die Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in 1848–1849.¹⁵ Lenin’s theory of a party *élite* was meant to rectify this omission by Marx. But Luxemburg steadfastly refused to accept Lenin’s solution.

Robert Michels in his classic study of the “oligarchic” tendencies of all organizations dealt extensively with the socialist parties of the Second International. He pointed out that, in spite of the socialists’ protestations that they represented contemporary democracy, their bureaucratic organizations,

¹⁵ See Marx and Engels, “Artikel aus der ‘Neuen Rheinischen Zeitung’ (9 November 1848–19 Mai 1849),” *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1961), VI, *passim*, and Engels, “Marx und die ‘Neue Rheinische Zeitung’ 1848–1849,” *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1962), XXI, 16–24.

especially that of the SPD, were very hierarchical (*i.e.*, the very opposite of "democratic").¹⁶ In his book Michels referred to Rosa Luxemburg at least ten times.¹⁷ (Lenin, unknown in the West outside of restricted socialist circles before the First World War when Michels wrote his book, was not mentioned at all.) Michels quoted extensively from Luxemburg's *Social Reform or Revolution?* and from her *The Mass Strike, the Party and the Trade Unions* to demonstrate the tendencies present in the SPD toward hierarchical organization (*e.g.*, Rosa's warning that the SPD Reichstag deputies tended to regard themselves as a "closed corporation" distinct from the rest of the Party).

It was, of course, very ironic that Michels, the student of the sociology of organization should cite Rosa to prove what she desperately sought to escape: the "iron law of oligarchy." Lenin, an élitist to the core, formulated a theory of Party organization that clearly accorded with Michels' principle of "oligarchy." In sharp contrast to Luxemburg, the Bolshevik leader (paraphrasing Archimedes) declared, "Give us an organization of revolutionaries, and we will overturn the whole of Russia!"¹⁸ Rosa Luxemburg's attempt to shut her eyes to the essential facts of organized human activity (for Michels' insight has never been essentially refuted) lent an air of unreality to her theory of the "spontaneous" nature of proletarian revolution.

¹⁶ See Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. by Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), especially Part Three "The Exercise of Power and Its Psychological Reaction upon the Leaders."

¹⁷ Unfortunately the index of the English edition of Michels' *Political Parties* (the 1959 edition, used in this study, is "an unabridged and unaltered reproduction of the English translation first published in 1915") is very unreliable. Therefore, Michels may well have cited Rosa Luxemburg in more than the ten places that the present author has been able to locate.

¹⁸ Lenin, *Sochineniia* (Moscow: Gosizdatpolitlit, 1960), VI, 127.

CANADIAN BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY

Publication of the first volume of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, 1,000 to 1,700*, has been announced by the University of Toronto. This work is distinguished by the scheme of publishing volumes dealing with historical periods, making possible the publication of early volumes before all sketches have been written. George W. Brown, Marcel Trudel and Andre Vachon are editor, associate editor and secretaire general of the undertaking.