

On the Historical Conditions of *The Accumulation of Capital*: Imperialism, Militarism and the Mass Strike

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In 1903, twenty years after the death of Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg published an essay on the “Stagnation and Progress of Marxism” that ought to guide our centennial return to her volume *The Accumulation of Capital*. Luxemburg here notes that despite the publication of the second and third volumes of Marx’s *Capital* in 1885 and 1894 respectively, political agitation and Marxist doctrine in Germany and elsewhere had been popularized on the basis of the incomplete conclusions of volume 1. As she writes regarding the second and third volumes – and as we today might extend to her *Accumulation of Capital* – “the splendid new weapon rusts unused” except amongst “the restricted circles of the experts.” Rather than draw from this that either on the one hand the last elaborations of Marx were inflexible, or on the other, the movement’s intellectual talents were insufficient, Luxemburg argues that “our needs are not yet adequate for the utilization of Marx’s ideas” and that only as proletarian struggle encounters new practical problems will we return to the rusting weaponry.¹

In one of his few prison notes on the writings of Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci claims that these conclusions on the “Stagnation and Progress of Marxism” are a form of historical mysticism insofar as they “present an abstract formulation of the fact to be explained as an explanation of the fact itself.” Nonetheless, Gramsci acknowledges that there is a kernel of truth here that must be dialectically developed. One articulation of this development is that the stagnation of Marxist theory comes from the historical necessity of the Marxist orthodoxy’s alliance with undialectical – e.g. positivist – materialisms “in order to combat

¹ Rosa Luxemburg, “Stagnation and Progress of Marxism,” 1903, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul, *Rosa*

the residues of the pre-capitalist world that still exist among the popular masses.”² And yet from the perspective of the totality, Gramsci’s development here seems to merely relocate Luxemburg’s alleged abstraction at a higher level. For the claim that dialectical materialism expresses itself less dialectically out of the practical necessities of the ideological struggle to educate the masses reifies as necessary one set of mediations between proletarian class consciousness and so-called pre-capitalist consciousness. Admittedly, Gramsci only a few pages later poses his solution more concretely – the stagnation of Marxism, i.e. the dilution of the dialectical element of the materialism, would be only ever be completely resolved when the petit bourgeois character of the Marxist intelligentsia was replaced by the emergence of an organically proletarian intelligentsia. Succinctly: “Only after the creation of the new State does the cultural problem impose itself in all its complexity and tend towards a coherent solution”; prior to this solution, Marxism can at best be a “critico-polemical” “romanticism.”³ Ironically, this is more or less the same solution that Luxemburg herself describes to the stagnation of Marxism: as she writes in the essay I’ve been discussing, “The working class will not be in a position to create a science and an art of its own until it has been fully emancipated from its present class position.”⁴ Given the difference in the abstractions of Luxemburg and Gramsci and the identity of their concrete solutions, the mediation of their contradiction demands discovery.

If on the one hand Luxemburg’s abstract formulation is the inadequacy of historical needs for *Capital* Vols. 2 and 3, and on the other Gramsci’s is that dialectical materialism necessarily becomes diluted in order to win over the masses – the historical intersection of the two explanations is the emergence of opportunistic socialism and its increasing influence in the Second International. The classic text addressing the problem of opportunism is Luxemburg’s own *Social Reform or Revolution*, published in 1899. Already in

² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 392.

³ Gramsci 397-398.

⁴ Luxemburg “Stagnation.”

this critique of Eduard Bernstein's articles on the "Problems of Socialism" for German Social Democracy Luxemburg marks out an historical tendency significantly responsible for the stagnation of Marxism, and thereby indicates the conditions of its solution. According to Luxemburg, opportunism emerges with Bernstein as its flag bearer as the ideology of the petit bourgeois elements of the Party seeking to push the struggle for social reforms from the means of Social Democracy into a replacement of the goal of social revolution. According to this ideology the collapse of capitalism becomes improbable because of its increasing adaptability and variation – in other words, general crises tend to disappear and segments of the proletariat are elevated into a middle class, with the worst proletarian conditions ameliorated by the trade-union struggle.⁵ Thus, the growth of opportunism in the Second International demands that only the Marxian problem of capitalist exploitation, formulated most rigorously in *Capital* Vol. 1, is of concern. The dialectical twists of surplus value on its path to realization through expanded reproduction and into the tendency of the rate of profit to fall leading the totality toward greater and greater crises, as discussed in Volumes 2 and 3, have little to offer petit bourgeois socialism – as Luxemburg puts it "Bernstein's theory of adaptation is nothing but a theoretical generalization of the conception of the individual capitalist."⁶ Furthermore, Bernstein's claim to popularize socialism by shifting the concern from the relations between capital and labor to those between rich and poor abandons the analysis of the structure of productive relations for the superstructure of property relations – moving from the dialectical basis of scientific socialism to that of utopian socialism.⁷ Indeed, Bernstein attacks the dialectic itself.⁸ But to discard volumes two and three of *Capital* to the rubbish heap of history is to discard the scientific unity of theory and practice that transforms the proletarian consciousness of the exploitative basis of capitalism and the tendency towards generalized crises into the necessity of social revolution. Thus opportunism teaches us that the

⁵ Rosa Luxemburg, "Social Reform or Revolution," 1899, trans. Dick Howard, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, eds. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 129-131.

⁶ Luxemburg, "Social Reform" 145.

⁷ Luxemburg, "Social Reform" 148.

⁸ Luxemburg, "Social Reform" 162.

nexus of Luxemburg and Gramsci's abstract formulations concerning the stagnation of Marxism find the conditions of their concrete solution in the historical necessity of preserving the fundamentally proletarian revolutionary character of the socialist struggle even before the conquest of political power. What at first seemed like a question of Marxist theory was already united with the necessities of proletarian revolutionary practice – of maintaining the particular social reformist means of struggle subordinate to the universal ends of revolution.

In *History and Class Consciousness* Georg Lukács argues that Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* is one of two books of its era that marks the "theoretical rebirth of Marxism."⁹ To understand this assertion in its fullness we must conceive of *The Accumulation of Capital* as depicting the concrete totality of capitalism from the proletarian revolutionary perspective of the conditions of its overthrow. In other words, not only does it brush the rust off of the weaponry of volumes two and three of *Capital*, it puts them to use as historically necessary theoretical weapons for new historical conditions of the practice of class war. This rust removal has not been without its controversy in its time or since. The controversy has mostly centered on several aspects of two sides of the dialectic to the argument of Luxemburg's book: on the one hand, that Marx's diagram of enlarged reproduction in *Capital* volume 2 cannot explain the actual, historical accumulation of capital since it includes only capitalists and workers, neither of whom can as a class be the purchasers within the totality of capitalist society necessary to realize surplus value and thus accumulate as it capital, thus necessitating the sale of surplus product to non-capitalist social strata, i.e. necessitating imperialism especially;¹⁰ on the other hand, insofar as capitalism both tends toward universality and depends on the destruction of non-capitalist social organizations, its tendency guarantees the elimination of its dependency, bringing its end all the more nearer as it realizes itself.

⁹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingston (London: The Merlin Press, 1971), 35.

¹⁰ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, 1913, trans. Agnes Schwarzschild (New York: Routledge, 2003), 332.

Ernst Mandel will be our first guide to the controversies. In his introduction to *Capital* Vol. 2, Mandel addresses Luxemburg's argument in three successively ways, moving from most abstract to most concrete. The first answer says that it is methodologically incorrect to pose the matter of the reproduction on an expanded scale in terms of the totality of capital, since it is properly a problem only for the competitive relations of many capitals. The second level considers the discontinuity of accumulation as a process, i.e., whether full realization of surplus value can be modeled using the schemas in a purely capitalist context – a context that Luxemburg did not take to be possible. Nonetheless, the ridiculousness of those who claim that the diagram itself proves that there is no limit to capital accumulation is made clear by the regularity of crises throughout the history of capitalism. At the third level of actual historical capital accumulation, Mandel maintains the essential correctness of Luxemburg.¹¹

In Luxemburg's time, her most important critic was Otto Bauer. By rewriting Marx's reproduction schemas so as to include elements only elaborated *Capital Vol. 3* including the comparatively faster development of Department I, the rising organic composition of capital, the falling rate of profit and the rising mass of profit Bauer produces a formula that claims to economic-theoretically demonstrate the earlier conclusions of Bernstein. As Luxemburg summarized in her *Anti-critique*, Bauer depicts capitalist production as capable of acting "limitlessly as its own consumer" and thereby becomes "(objectively) limitless once [it] has built a sufficient market for itself." Bauer's conception thus makes incomprehensible the crises created by capitalism's tendency to exceed the limits of its market thereby eliminating an understanding of the objective tendencies out of which proletarian consciousness and class struggle emerges and grows – in other words eliminating the scientific basis of the necessity of socialist revolution.¹² Lukács's defense of Luxemburg is particularly indicative with regard to Bauer – for Lukács points to the exclusively

¹¹ Ernst Mandel, "Introduction," Karl Marx, *Capital Volume II*, trans. David Fernbach, 1978 (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 66-68.

¹² Rosa Luxemburg, "The Critics," *The Accumulation of Capital – An Anti-Critique*, 1921, trans. Rudolf Wichmann (1972), *Rosa Luxemburg Internet Archive*.

methodological usefulness of Marx's schematized purely capitalist society. Marx's positing of a society consisting of only capitalists and workers is an attempt to clarify, as he writes in volume two, that the "conditions for the normal course of reproduction, whether simple or on an expanded scale...turn into an equal number of conditions for an abnormal course" and thus necessitate "possibilities of crisis, since, on the basis of the spontaneous pattern of this production, this balance is itself an accident."¹³ But Marx's hypothetical society by no means serves to conceive accumulation as the concrete totality of the problem but rather, to quote Lukács, "to see the problem more clearly, before pressing forward to the larger question of the place of this problem within society as a whole."¹⁴ Bauer's attempt to demonstrate the opportunistically claimed tendency for class antagonisms to weaken bases itself in a precisely undialectical or pseudo-dialectical manner by bringing problems Marx addresses in volume three into the accumulation diagrams of volume two.

Dialectical materialism undoubtedly demands discovering not only the place of the partial problem within the totality of society, but also the discovery of the totality within each part. But Bauer only appears to do this by abstractly formulating his solution, or rather dissolution, of the problem of accumulation as the totality of capitalist society. Luxemburg's *Anti-Critique* thus brings us back towards concrete totalization by reminding us of Marx's own placement of the diagrams as a precursor to the elaboration of his theory of crises. What's more is that, following the lines of *The Accumulation of Capital* itself, Luxemburg argues contra Bauer not only that his formulae make the historical reality of crises incomprehensible, they also make incomprehensible the growth of imperialistic competition for foreign markets. On this point it might seem correct when Lukács asserts that the opportunists "suppressed the fact that on this issue *Capital* is an incomplete fragment which stops short at the point where this problem should be opened up."¹⁵ But it

¹³ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume II*, 1885, trans. David Fernbach, 1978 (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 571.

¹⁴ Lukács 31.

¹⁵ Lukács 31.

would seem that the perspective Luxemburg elaborates from the “Stagnation and Progress of Marxism” through *The Accumulation of Capital* to the *Anti-Critique* that, at least in the case of Bernstein and Bauer, on the contrary the opportunists treat *Capital* as incomplete fragments to be sampled from and reorganized willy-nilly, while it is the hallmark of Luxemburg’s orthodoxy that, as she writes in the “Stagnation” essay, “Marx, in his scientific creation, has outstripped us as a party of practical fighters.” This is to say that today perhaps we can most adhere to Luxemburg’s conception by conceding the second point of Mandel’s above – that Marx’s reproduction diagrams work for a purely capitalist society – and arguing that the confusion of the methodological levels addressed in Mandel’s first point might be sorted out by considering the necessary presupposition that pure capitalism concerns the competition of many capitals as a formulation of the abstract totality of capitalist society. In Lukács’ terms and in Luxemburg’s from *Social Reform or Revolution* this abstract totality is still the total conception of society belonging to the individual capitalist and the political economist – including opportunistic socialists. It is only from the proletarian revolutionary perspective on crises and imperialism that we receive a concrete conception of the capitalist totality.

When in the closing chapter of *The Accumulation of Capital* Luxemburg introduces militarist production as the only sphere of accumulation that appears viably without limits and brings Marx’s diagrams back into use in her analysis this must be understood as an historical realization of the place of the diagrams in a capitalist totality. It is worth quoting her at some great length.

All other attempts to expand markets and set up operational bases for capital largely depend on historical, social and political factors beyond the control of capital, whereas production for militarism represents a province whose regular and progressive expansions seems primarily determined by capital itself.

In this way capital turns historical necessity into a virtue: the ever-fiercer competition in the capitalist world itself provides a field for accumulation of the first magnitude. Capital increasingly employs militarism for implementing a foreign and colonial policy to get hold of the means of production and labour power of non-capitalist countries and societies. This same militarism works in a like manner in the capitalist countries to divert purchasing power away from the non-capitalist strata. The representatives of simple commodity production and the working class are affected alike in this way. At their expense, the accumulation of capital is raised to the highest power, by robbing the one of their productive forces and depressing the other’s standard of living. Needless to say, after a certain stage the conditions for the accumulation of capital both at

home and abroad turn into their very opposite – they become conditions for the decline of capitalism.

The more ruthlessly capital sets about the destruction of non-capitalist strata at home and in the outside world, the more it lowers the standard of living for the workers as a whole, the greater also is the change in the day-to-day history of capital. It becomes a string of political and social disasters and convulsions, and under these conditions, punctuated by periodical economic catastrophes or crises accumulation can go on no longer.

But even before this natural economic impasse of capital's own creation is properly reached it becomes a necessity for the international working class to revolt against the rule of capital.¹⁶

Though it will undoubtedly be necessary to return to a discussion of the details of these conclusions on militarist production, imperialism and socialist revolution before long, it is with their introduction that we will for now shift attention to the matter of the historical conditions of their emergence as the solution to the problem of accumulation. These conditions will be considered along two lines, first, and more extensively the, theoretical and second, and more shortly, the practical. It has already been argued that *The Accumulation of Capital* puts to use the rusted conclusions of volume one, but also volumes two and three of Marx's *Capital* – to quote above – “as historically necessary theoretical weapons for new historical conditions of the practice of class war.” The matter at hand now is to complete the proof beyond the one-sided context of Luxemburg's debates with opportunism. Theoretically, we see much of the groundwork for the final section of Luxemburg's volume on accumulation laid in her research on the dissolution of primitive communism undergone during the decade between her stagnation essay and the publication of her masterpiece. Two texts are of chief concern here, one originally intended as an early chapter in her unfinished *Introduction to Political Economy*, titled by the Anglophone editors of *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* “The Dissolution of Primitive Communism” and the second, drawn from the same *Reader* entitled “Slavery.” These texts represent a period of research elaborating upon the closing part of *Capital Volume 1* in a search to establish more concretely the conditions of capitalist primitive accumulation.

Beginning with “Slavery,” there are a number of conclusions from this research that are worth considering. Luxemburg draws attention to the uniqueness of slavery as “the oldest form of class

¹⁶ Luxemburg, *Accumulation* 446-447.

domination and economic exploitation,” but considers Friedrich Engels’s explanation of the emergence of slavery in his *Anti-Dühring* lacking. There, Engels argues that following the establishment of private property, war supplied an enchained workforce to meet the new demand for foreign labor. Luxemburg finds this insufficient. Since slavery came subsequent to primitive communism – or the mark, in her generalization of the German term – it is there its conditions must be found, rather than in the form of private property.¹⁷ As Luxemburg demonstrates with reference to the Inca Empire and also to ancient Greece, prior to the emergence of private property exploitation and servitude had resulted from the conquest of one mark community by another. “The grafting of a foreign mark onto another allows for and creates a relationship of exploitation and servitude *toward the outside*” preserved by the dominant mark’s military aristocracy.¹⁸ Thus, slavery and private property come together with the growing militaristic dissolution of primitive communism, though slavery itself begins as a mode of subjugating the conquered laborer to a state of communal property.¹⁹ With reference to Aristotle’s *Politics* Luxemburg argues that slavery effectuates “a complete split between mental and manual labor,”²⁰ a split that was initiated with the formation of militaristic and priestly aristocracy, and that will finally be overturned with the realization of socialist society.²¹

In the text on “The Dissolution of Primitive Communism” Luxemburg elaborates on the preconditions of slavery and the emergence of military apparatuses as a permanent structure. For her, the domination of one mark by another demonstrates that primitive communism has no basis in a general principle of freedom and equality, but merely solidarity amongst the membership of the marks whose

¹⁷ Rosa Luxemburg, “Slavery,” trans. Ashley Passmore and Kevin B. Anderson, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, eds. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 111.

¹⁸ Luxemburg, “Slavery” 112. Italics hers.

¹⁹ Luxemburg, “Slavery” 114.

²⁰ Luxemburg, “Slavery” 120.

²¹ Luxemburg, “Slavery” 121-122.

traditions of communal property and production hold them together.²² War functions as a “method of solving conflicts of interest between social communities,”²³ while the military apparatus itself only emerges from “the imperative to establish exploitation as a permanent structure.”²⁴ On the one hand, war is a method of overcoming limits to production by economic exploitation and subjugation. On the other, those modes of production that persistently require overcoming their own limits develop a military aristocracy by means of which war may become permanent. It is the demands of inter-social trade upon the militarily exploitative community that pulls slavery as a private property form into being, as in Greece.²⁵ In the Americas, it is Spanish colonialism that introduces the debt systems, coerced labor, land grabbing and taxation that collapse the indigenous mark communities, even those that depended upon the military exploitation of marks.²⁶ European colonialism represents the highest achievement of militarism up to that point by introducing the wholly new phenomena of expropriating the means of production of other societies, completing the collapse of those societies, and subjugating the former members of those societies to a new one in which their alternatives are enslavement or extermination.²⁷ All together, Luxemburg’s “Slavery” and “The Dissolution of Primitive Communism” puts the accent on militarism rather than private property as the mode of production’s lever on the increasing systemization of exploitation. As she phrases it in *The Accumulation of Capital*, “political power is nothing but a vehicle for the economic process.”²⁸ Indeed, she shows here her orthodoxy exceeds even that of Engels at times, by demonstrating that the origination of

²² Rosa Luxemburg, “The Dissolution of Primitive Communism,” trans. Ashley Passmore and Kevin B. Anderson, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, eds. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 78.

²³ Luxemburg, “Dissolution” 79.

²⁴ Luxemburg, “Dissolution” 81.

²⁵ Luxemburg, “Dissolution” 82.

²⁶ Luxemburg, “Dissolution” 88.

²⁷ Luxemburg, “Dissolution” 110.

²⁸ Luxemburg, *Accumulation* 433.

class domination and exploitation in slavery is not at all a superstructural effect of private property but a structural effect of the limitations of productive capacity.

Turning now to the practical historical conditions for Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital*, her participation in the 1907 Stuttgart Congress of the Second International will be one of two cases considered. In 1904 a resolution of the Amsterdam Congress of the International called for its participant parties to study the conditions of colonialism in order to establish Internationalist Socialist policy on the matter. These studies came to fruition in Stuttgart with three days of lengthy reports and debates over the matter.²⁹ At this Congress a Colonial Commission was appointed that drafted a majority report highlighting the so-called positive sides of colonialism, and resolving for the advocacy of reforms and legal protections for and education of colonized indigenous populations. Though the resolution was defeated by a slim margin, it was made clear that half of those organized endorsed at least the premise upon which the European imperialist powers competed for control over regions of Africa and Asia.³⁰ Thus, an Anti-Militarist Commission was formed that crafted a new resolution, the first draft of which determined militarism to be an extension of capitalism, the end of which would only come with capitalism's own end.³¹ This first draft, as V.I. Lenin wrote on the matter, "failed to indicate the active tasks of the proletariat" and thereby permitted this orthodox proposition to be viewed through an opportunistic lens.³² Georg Heinrich Vollmar put forward just this lens by determining that parliamentary struggle ought to be the exclusive

²⁹ Julius Braunthal, *History of the International: Volume 1: 1863-1914* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), 318-319.

³⁰ Tony Cliff, "The fight against imperialism and war," *Rosa Luxemburg, 1959, Marxists' Internet Archive* (2008).

³¹ Cheng Yen-Shih, "The Struggle at the Stuttgart Congress," *Lenin's Fight Against Revisionism and Opportunism* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1965), 54.

³² V.I. Lenin, "The International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart," 1907, trans. Bernard Isaacs, *Lenin Internet Archive* (2004).

mode of applying pressure on political authority and public opinion.³³ Luxemburg submitted the following counter-proposal.

In the event of a threat of war it is the duty of the workers and their parliamentary representatives in the countries involved to do everything possible to prevent the outbreak of war by taking suitable measures, which can of course change or be intensified in accordance with the intensification of the class struggle and the general political situation.

In the event of war breaking out nevertheless, it is their duty to take measures to bring it to an end as quickly as possible, and to utilise the economic and political crisis brought about by the war to arouse the masses of the people and accelerate the overthrow of capitalist class rule.³⁴

The resolution was passed.

The first chapter to Luxemburg's Junius Pamphlet on *The Crisis in German Social Democracy* describes the general circumstances leading up to the publication of *The Accumulation of Capital* as well as those that led to her arrest and imprisonment under charges of inciting German soldiers to mutiny against the imperialist military apparatus. It is from prison that it was written. She writes of the times,

Business is flourishing upon the ruins. Cities are turned into shambles, whole countries into deserts, villages into cemeteries, whole nations into beggars, churches into stables....Hunger revolts in Venetia, in Lisbon, in Moscow, in Singapore; pestilence in Russia, misery and desperation is everywhere....And in the midst of this orgy a world tragedy has occurred; the capitulation of the Social Democracy.³⁵

We have already seen the beginnings of this capitulation with the opportunist elements of the Second International securing a near victory in 1907. Nonetheless, the efficacy of the Stuttgart anti-imperialist resolution for securing proletarian revolutionary consciousness and solidarity seems indubitable. In 1911 the official handbook for German socialist voters still maintains the notion that a world war would "be, in all probability, the last war." When that summer German imperialists nearly brought on the war by sending the warship the *Panther* to Agadir, Morocco an international socialist meeting in London declared European labor delegates prepared to oppose a declaration of war by any means necessary. A year later, in September

³³ Yen-shih 53.

³⁴ Quoted in Cliff, "The fight."

³⁵ Rosa Luxemburg, "The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis in Germany Social Democracy," 1915, trans. Socialist Publication Society, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, eds. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 313.

on the floor of the German Reichstag the Social Democratic deputy represented the refusal of the masses to be instruments of war profiteering, and at the International Peace Congress in November allegiance to the International was maintained as the moral force against the war, with all willingness to make any necessary sacrifice to the socialist struggle.³⁶

According to some accounts, as, for example the introduction to the most recent Routledge English edition, *The Accumulation of Capital* represents the product of a “sudden revelation” that led Luxemburg to unorthodoxy. Even Lukács, in the context of his relocation of the question of orthodoxy from the matter of the Marx’s system as developed in *Capital* to the method of dialectical materialism, asserted that Luxemburg there solves Marx’s unfinished problem of accumulation. At the level of theoretical conditions I have already argued that militarism and imperialism concretizes the abstract totality conceived by Marx – establishing military production as both the site of the reproduction schema’s most perfect application and as the preeminent social method from primitive communism to capitalism for overcoming even the firmest internal limits to productive expansion. At the level of historical conditions we have seen that, despite the claims of the opportunists that capitalist reproductive expansion within its own market becomes increasingly limitless, European militarism marches on while proletarian opposition remains apparently solid. It is here then that we find *The Accumulation of Capital*, perhaps as revelation, but as the revelation of the de-rusted theoretical weaponry of scientific socialism, as the utilization of Marx’s ideas in the adequate, which is to say concrete, historical context of Luxemburg’s publication. So, though we have found that Gramsci’s characterization of Luxemburg’s formulations in the “Stagnation and Progress of Marxism” as abstract was indeed correct, so too do we find that their true kernel concretely realizes itself with the publication of *The Accumulation of Capital*.

Returning to the long quote above, the uniqueness of the providence of militarist production should be clear. If militarism is most significantly a motor of economic expansion and a destroyer of the

³⁶ Luxemburg, “Junius” 318-319.

limits posed by non-capitalist social organization then it is also necessarily the site of capitalism's purest reproductive form. Insofar as imperialism on the one hand robs simple commodity producers of their means of production and the other depresses the proletariat's quality of life it gives birth to capitalism's grave on two counts. On the one hand, imperialism progressively destroys the basis of capital's apparently limitless expansion outside of itself, and on the other it creates the conditions of possibility for its internally productive classes coming to consciousness of their fate within the totality. Consequently, Luxemburg's conclusion points to the necessary resolution of these two sides of the dialectic in socialist revolution. The historical crisis of German Social Democracy indicates precisely this. To quote from the Junius pamphlet,

The real problem that the world war has placed before the socialist parties, upon whose solution the future of the working class movement depends, *is the readiness of the proletarian mass to act in the fight against imperialism*. The international proletariat suffers, not from a dearth of postulates, programs, and slogans, but from a lack of deeds, of effective resistance, of the power to attack imperialism at the decisive moment, just in times of war. It has been unable to put its old slogan, war against war, into actual practice. Here is the Gordian knot of the proletarian movement and of its future.³⁷

Luxemburg refuses to accept that the failure to stop the war is a consequence of a failure of the leadership of the proletariat – of Social Democracy's flagging readiness to continue class war against world war. Thus returns Gramsci's initial solution to the problem of the stagnation of Marxist theory – that it encounters its most significant difficulties in combat with the residues of pre-capitalist ideology – that the consciousness of the proletarian mass had not caught up with the imperialist historical reality of capitalism. If this is so, then it is not only a failure to recognize the consequences of imperialism for its own class, but also a failure to recognize the destructive realities of imperialism for non-capitalist social strata at home and abroad – a failure of the mediation of proletarian and non-capitalist social classes (especially peasant) to be realized in a concrete alliance. It is in this very recognition of historically necessary alliance that the Bolshevik revolution triumphs. In her text on *The Russian Revolution* Luxemburg again invokes the classical image of the Gordian

³⁷ Luxemburg, "Junius" 337. Italics hers.

knot, but this time as cut by the conquest of power of the workers and peasants in alliance against imperialist war and for the equitable redistribution of the land.³⁸

On the question of the redistribution of land – as with the question of national self-determination which shall be dealt with later – we must side with Luxemburg against Lenin and his spokesperson Lukács. Luxemburg acknowledges the tactical excellence of the Bolshevik seizure and distribution of the land by and for the peasants, but criticizes it strategically, arguing that this move cannot lead to socialist agriculture on several counts. First, the new socialist economy depends upon the largest estates as the most advanced method of agricultural production,³⁹ but most importantly second, that this immediate seizure and distribution establishes the relatively unassailable barricade of a “new form of private property” in the form of “medium and small states” increasing rather than eliminating class antagonisms amongst the peasants by creating a “newly developed and powerful mass of owning peasants who will defend their newly won property with tooth and nail against every socialist attack.”⁴⁰ To this argument Lukács responds that Luxemburg overemphasizes to the point of misrecognition the conscious proletarian character of the revolution and underacknowledges the significance of the party. Accordingly, Lukács argues that Luxemburg does not see the significance of the participation of non-proletarians, and especially peasants, in the Bolshevik revolution, because she overestimates the organic, spontaneous forces of the revolution.⁴¹ On the contrary, what we must now demonstrate is that that the matter of spontaneity *vis-a-vis* socialist revolution is precisely a question of the socialist revolutionary consciousness of the masses rather than the organized consciousness of the party. In other words, the problem is precisely the maintenance of dialectical materialism in and through popular combat with pre-and-non-capitalist ideologies.

³⁸ Rosa Luxemburg, “The Russian Revolution,” 1922, trans. Bertram D. Wolfe, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, eds. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 287.

³⁹ Luxemburg, “Russian” 290.

⁴⁰ Luxemburg, “Russian” 292.

⁴¹ Lukács 274-275.

On this subject, it is necessary to make a detour through the theory of two of the foremost anti-imperialist dialectical materialists of the 20th Century – Mao Tse-tung and Aimé Césaire. Let us begin with Tse-tung’s classic essay “On Contradiction.” The overarching reminder here is that the universal dimension of a given contradiction resides in its particularity.⁴² Tse-tung elaborates this by introducing the notions of the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of the contradiction. In the case of capitalist society the principal contradiction – that which determines all other contradictions – is the relationship between labor and capital. But in a colonial or semi-colonial society the principal contradiction may shift – when the nation is united against imperialism, the principal contradiction is between the colonizers and the colonized, but in conditions of neo-colonialism, wherein the imperialists are in alliance with an indigenous ruling class, the principal contradiction is between the indigenous masses and rulers. The principal aspect in any case is the dominant and therefore determining side of a given contradiction, while the overturning of a given contradiction produces a qualitatively new contradiction by means of the determinations of the newly ascended principal aspect. In these terms, we would defend Luxemburg against Lukács by arguing that the tactical success but strategic failure of Bolshevik land policy is not an underestimation of the non-proletarian participation in the revolution, but on the contrary the failure to resolve the contradiction between socialist industry and agriculture into principality by allowing the principal contradiction between the feudal landlords and the peasants to resolve into a new, more complex and distributed principal contradiction between the medium estate owning peasant-capitalists and the small estate owning peasants. In Paul Mattick’s 1935 essay “Luxemburg versus Lenin,” he terms this “the capitalisation of agriculture.”⁴³ Put differently, Luxemburg does not fail to see the significance of the party but rather appropriately estimates the significance of the contradictions of Russian agricultural society for Russian socialism as a whole.

⁴² Mao Tse-Tung, “On Contradiction,” 1937, *On Practice and Contradiction* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2007), 72.

⁴³ Paul Mattick, “Luxemburg versus Lenin,” 1935, *Marxists’ Internet Archive* (2005), web.

It is to Aimé Césaire's 1956 resignation from the French Communist party that we turn to next as a fundamental text of anti-imperialist communist theory in particular on the question of consciousness. Césaire was, to those who do not know him or his work, the author of both the masterpiece of modernist African diasporic poetry entitled *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, published in 1939, and the classic of anti-imperialist literature *Discourse on Colonialism*, published in 1955, as well the secondary school teacher of Frantz Fanon, and, finally, a communist politician of note in his indigenous Martinique. As Césaire writes in his resignation "Letter to Maurice Thorez," people of color in their struggles against colonial powers "have come to grasp, in [their] consciousness, the full breadth of [their] singularity, and are ready to assume on all levels and in all areas the responsibilities that flow from this coming to consciousness" asserting that in their anti-colonial and anti-racist – their anti-imperial – struggle their historical consciousness and practice cannot be relegated outside the principal contradiction,⁴⁴ as it had not only in capitalist but also in the Communist International's ideology – the latter according to which metropolitan-centered worker's anti-capitalist struggle was principal.⁴⁵ Typical of this Eurocentrism was Jean Paul-Sartre's essay, entitled "Black Orpheus," concerning the poetry of Césaire and others associated with the concept of Négritude. Sartre writes of Négritude "as the minor moment of a dialectical progression" in which it is a purely negative phenomenon posed against white supremacist imperialism. Négritude is thus a "subjective, existential, ethnic notion" to be surpassed "into the objective, positive and precise, notion of the *proletariat*" in the class struggle with capitalism.⁴⁶

Césaire's resignation reminds us then and now of the consequences of segregating particulars and universals by asserting a need to think their mediation – his "conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular" – according to which he "consider[ed] it our duty to combine our efforts

⁴⁴ Aimé Césaire, "Letter to Maurice Thorez," 1956, *Social Text*, 28:2 (Summer 2010), 147.

⁴⁵ Césaire, "Letter" 150.

⁴⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Black Orpheus," 1948, trans. John McCombie, *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 137.

with those of all men with a passion for justice and truth, in order to build organizations susceptible of honesty and effectively helping black peoples in their struggle for today and for tomorrow” – in other words, to build “organizations capable...of preparing them” to operate in an “autonomous manner.”⁴⁷ The question at hand is precisely that of the proper mediation between socialist revolutionary consciousness and that of so-called pre- or non-capitalist consciousness. In “rural and peasant societies...in which the working class is tiny and...the middle classes have a political importance out of proportion” is “effective action by communist organizations acting in isolation” possible?⁴⁸ In the anti-imperial context Césaire proposes that Marxists ought to operate so as to inspire and focus rather than divide popular organizing.⁴⁹ This inspiration and focus must aid rather than oppose popular unity formulated along lines of cultural consciousness since it is precisely the unity of colonized peoples that conditions an overturning of imperialism in the colonies. In other words, it could be said that Sartre has merely abstractly formulated the facts and presented this abstraction as a solution to the problem at hand.

By conceiving the question of socialist revolutionary consciousness in the struggle of colonized peoples as a historical problem of effectuating the proper mediation between Marxism and predominantly peasant popular organizing Césaire presents a dialectical materialist conception of the problem Gramsci described for us earlier and which Luxemburg and Lenin debated. At the conclusion of his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire asserts that the salvation of Europe and all of the metropole depends upon the success of the universal mission of the proletariat.⁵⁰ This success is only possible based on the practice of solidarity between the working classes and rural colonized peoples since alongside industrial production there is the what Césaire terms “the factory for the production of lackeys” at work “spitting out its cinders in the hearts

⁴⁷ Césaire, “Letter” 152.

⁴⁸ Césaire, “Letter” 147.

⁴⁹ Césaire, “Letter” 148.

⁵⁰ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 1955, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 200), 78.

of our forests or deep in the bush.”⁵¹ Just as Luxemburg articulates for us the internal contradictions of capital that create imperialism, whereby “Capital increasingly employs militarism for implementing a foreign and colonial policy to get hold of the means of production and labour power of non-capitalist countries and societies,” Césaire describes the parallel movement of imperialism’s ideological and practical degradation of colonized peoples, an ideology and practice that displays a “boomerang effect” with the rise of fascism in Europe.⁵² In the name of solidarity, Césaire asserts the need for a European proletarian “policy of *nationalities*...founded on respect for peoples and cultures,”⁵³ while Luxemburg in her Junius pamphlet presciently reminds us that although “International Socialism recognizes the right of free independent nations with equal rights...Socialism alone can create such nations” for in the context of the capitalist totality “imperialistic world policies determine and regulate the inner and the outer life of a nation.”⁵⁴ The contradiction of the two positions is quite easily resolved with support from each. On the one hand, the respect for peoples and cultures demands, amongst other things, the recognition of the real achievement of solidarity belonging to so-called “primitive” communist or communalist societies even if this solidarity has at times confined itself within communities. On the other hand, international socialism is based on degrees of but also creates conditions for the independence of peoples and cultures insofar as the destruction of capitalism from within itself is none other than the destruction of imperialism from without. In short, solidarity and autonomy are as distinct as they are inextricable – not merely in the communist future, but also in the struggles of the present, historically variant as the manner of their mediation may be. The importance of autonomy, amongst other things, may explain why Luxemburg never proposed policy to

⁵¹ Césaire, *Discourse* 77.

⁵² Césaire, *Discourse* 36, 41.

⁵³ Césaire, *Discourse* 77.

⁵⁴ Luxemburg, “Junius” 325.

colonized peoples abroad though she persistently referred to imperialism to motivate socialist struggle in Europe.⁵⁵

All of this returns us to where we left the debate between Bolshevism and Luxemburg. For as Lenin, Lukács and the history of the Communist International would indicate, Bolshevism commits itself to a form of solidarity with peasants and other non-proletarian exploited classes whose opportunism makes a show of promoting self-determination while not taking seriously the principality of contradictions other than those between organized capital and industrial labor. Before coming back to Luxemburg, it worth addressing Lenin directly. Consider *What Is To Be Done?*, published in 1902, several years before the events in Russia that would inspire Luxemburg to write her book on *The Mass Strike*. Lenin's book develops the critique of spontaneism that would be, along with its other side economism, one of the chief charges against Luxemburg, but on questions of the strike and imperialism especially. Lenin criticizes what he calls the "worship of spontaneity" on the basis of the historical necessity to change socialist revolutionary tactics. Since the then present form of workers' struggle – predominantly trade-unionist – is deemed insufficient, the basis of socialist unity must start with drawing distinctions of principal and practice.⁵⁶ Though, as Lenin writes following Marx's "Critique of the Gotha Programme," entering "into agreements to satisfy the practical aims of the movement" must at times be necessary to maintain unity, scientific socialism ought to make no theoretical compromises since "[w]ithout revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement."⁵⁷ The similarity between Lenin here and Luxemburg on opportunism should by no means be shocking, since economism and the worship of spontaneity were attributed by Lenin to Bernstein and other opportunists in this very book, as well as elsewhere.

⁵⁵ J.P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg, Volume 2* (London: Oxford U Press, 1966), 535.

⁵⁶ V.I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, 1902, *Lenin: Selected Works, Volume 1* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 136.

⁵⁷ Lenin, *What* 138.

It is from the importance of theory and the historical emergence of scientific socialism that Lenin validates the significance of party organization. Though worker struggle occurs out of the antagonism with capital, Lenin argues that scientific socialism not only did but had to be brought to workers from without. Since trade union consciousness is the extent of workers' spontaneous self-knowledge, bourgeois intellectuals the likes of Marx and Engels could have only synthesized the philosophical, historical, and economic theories into the form we know as Marxism. Similarly, the formation of a revolutionary socialist intelligentsia in Russia committed to scientific socialism could not spontaneously emerge out of the workers' movement.⁵⁸ At this point, the difference between Lenin and Luxemburg becomes clearer – for it will be recalled from the discussion of her “Stagnation” essay, that her take, one I have asserted as one of the hallmarks of her orthodoxy, is that the conditions of struggle push forward the refurbishing of Marxist theory, even if it is true that revolutionary theory itself is a precondition for revolutionary struggle. Lenin's assertion that “there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement”⁵⁹ is actually assumed by Luxemburg when she provides her historical analysis of the causes of Marxist theoretical stagnation – recall, after all, her agreement with Gramsci that it is only with the overthrow of class conditions that a true workers' science, or for that matter, art, will be possible. One could only assume that Luxemburg would agree with Lenin when he writes of the necessity of Social-Democracy to “take up actively the political education of the working class and the development of its political consciousness.”⁶⁰ What would seem to then be the danger, one which undoubtedly resonates in hindsight, is that socialist revolutionary leadership – i.e. the party – come to mistake itself for general socialist revolutionary consciousness, whether amongst the urban workers or any other exploited class. This danger should by no means paralyze socialist struggle “since,” as Luxemburg reminds us in *Social Reform or Revolution*, “the proletariat is absolutely obliged to seize power ‘too early’

⁵⁸ Lenin, *What* 143.

⁵⁹ Lenin, *What* 150.

⁶⁰ Lenin, *What* 164.

once or several times before it can enduringly maintain itself in power” and as such continue the withering away of the state and class society. It is for this reason that we must not seek to validate, or for that matter demonize, one particular form of social revolutionary organization – whether in control of the state or not – we must of course historicize. As Luxemburg also points out in the same passage, the passage to socialist society will not begin with “one act, by a victorious blow of the proletariat.”⁶¹ Against Lukács, who, in defense of Lenin’s brand of orthodoxy, claims Luxemburg overvalues mass spontaneity and undervalues party organization we must take seriously her writing on mass strikes.

We have now seen how Lukács’ critique of Luxemburg’s distinction between the tactical success but strategic failure of Bolshevik land policy may be rejected. For it is not merely looking backwards that Luxemburg sought to insist on this distinction. Lukács writes that “Luxemburg overlooks the choice between ‘impure’ socialist necessities which fate forced upon the proletarian revolution right from the start” insofar as the ascendance of the revolutionary party demanded a consolidation of forces. The point is that the overemphasis on organization and a certain kind of decisive action risks undermining socialist revolutionary principles and the growth of socialist revolutionary consciousness amongst all exploited classes such that anything more than an opportunistic consolidation of forces may be possible. In other words, Luxemburg criticizes Bolshevik policy from the perspective of future socialist strategy – not out of a desire to invalidate proletarian state power, but so as to be wary of creating and recreating an intractable circumstance of state capitalism that garbs itself in socialist ideology. This acknowledged, Luxemburg’s largely positive appraisal of the Russian Revolution emphasizes the “driving force...of the mass of the urban proletariat” that the Bolshevik’s had managed to galvanize in solidarity with the peasants to cut through the Gordian knot of imperialism.⁶²

⁶¹ Luxemburg, *Social* 159.

⁶² Luxemburg, “Russian” 285-287.

Turning to the matter of mass strikes, it is important to clarify the relationship between Luxemburg's discussion of strikes and the publication of *The Accumulation of Capital*. From the perspective of her biographer, J.P. Nettl, after the Russian Revolution of 1905 Luxemburg's conception of the role of the party moved towards considering organization "a potential hindrance, cohesion a factor of immobility, [and] tradition a dead weight," all of which she believed the revolution demonstrated could be brought back into dynamism when confronted by enthusiastic mass action.⁶³ According to the view I have sought to articulate, since at least 1903 Luxemburg reserved a propulsive force to the practice of struggle as orthodox as the "Theses on Feuerbach," though undoubtedly *The Mass Strike* took her conception thereof to a new level. What should be of particular interest today is Nettl's claim that Luxemburg's "preoccupation with imperialism...arose directly out of the mass-strike discussion."⁶⁴ One connection between imperialism and the mass strike has already been alluded to in the above citation of Luxemburg's resolution at the 1907 Stuttgart Congress – wherein it was resolved that any means necessary should be deployed by the workers and their party to prevent the threat of an oncoming imperialist war. The chronology of conception that Nettl lays out is as follows: "we first have a mass-strike doctrine, then a struggle for its application, next a dissatisfaction with party policy against a background of personal disenchantment, and finally the development of a doctrine of imperialism in order to overcome the party's recalcitrance."⁶⁵ Much like the introduction to the current Routledge English edition of the accumulation book, Nettl describes Luxemburg's concern with imperialism as "visionary" and an "inspiration"⁶⁶ – a glowing appraisal that nonetheless, next to the "background of personal disenchantment," risks implying that Luxemburg's so-called "preoccupation" with imperialism exceeds the bounds of an orthodox reading of Marx.

⁶³ Nettl 513.

⁶⁴ Nettl 519.

⁶⁵ Nettl 519-520.

⁶⁶ Nettl 493.

It has already been seen how Luxemburg's analysis of imperialism historically arrives at a conception of the concrete totality – passing from the practical concern with militarism at Stuttgart to the theory thereof that emerges out of her research on slavery and the dissolution of primitive communism to the historical political economy of *The Accumulation of Capital* and thereafter. This work arrives amid an internal struggle in Social Democracy to withstand the bourgeois imperialist influence of opportunism by putting to use Marx's once-rusted weaponry. Imperialism is precisely the capitalist totality in its militaristic destruction of non-capitalist social strata, at home as much as abroad, including the immobilization of the revolutionary potential of Social Democracy. Though it may not have been initially framed in these terms, it is the mass strike that appears in Luxemburg as the proletarian counter-force to this immobilization and to imperialism as a whole.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, Luxemburg insisted that “[i]f anyone were to undertake to make the mass strike generally as a form of proletarian action the object of methodical agitation” it would be as much of a waste of effort as to reify others form of revolution and proselytize them.

What was to be propagandized is not a strategic analysis of the tactical form, but the historical contexts of intensifying class struggle which have informed it. “The mass strike has now become the center of the lively interest of the German and the international working class because it is a new form of struggle, and as such is the sure symptom of a thoroughgoing internal revolution in the relations of the classes and in the conditions of class struggle,” Luxemburg writes.⁶⁸ Mass strikes make possible an awakening of class feeling and consciousness because they are themselves are a spectacular expression of it – in them “undercurrents of the social process of the revolution cross one another, check one another, and increase the internal contradictions of the revolution” with an overall intensification of circumstances.⁶⁹ The most lasting repercussion of the mass wave is not a particular form of action but an enlivening intellectualization

⁶⁷ Nettl 519-547.

⁶⁸ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions*, 1906, trans. Patrick Lavan, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, eds. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 171.

⁶⁹ Luxemburg, *The Mass* 181, 182.

of the necessity and conditions of action, a consciousness that lays the basis for further economic and political struggle.⁷⁰ Contrary to accusations of economism, Luxemburg's argument is that the political mass actions that emerge from socialist revolutionary consciousness dissolve after their pinnacle into a mass of economic strikes, that the refinement of political struggle effectuates a further spread and formalization of the economic struggle – as she writes in short, “the economic struggle is the transmitter from one political center to another; the political struggle is the periodic fertilization of the soil for the economic struggle.”⁷¹ The theory of the mass strike is that it in practice effectuates a consciousness amenable to dialectical materialism insofar as the reciprocal action of the economic and the political is precisely what it displays.

For scientific socialism to be efficacious, Marxists must work within the class struggle to support the formation of class-consciousness in and through mass action by themselves taking principled and consistent action – for it is our project to inspire “in the masses a feeling of security, self-confidence and desire for struggle.”⁷² The basis of this action must of course be our knowledge of the concrete totality of capitalism – and the dialectic of solidarity and autonomy this knowledge demands in the face of imperialism. *The Accumulation of Capital* is a crucial weapon in our struggle for it elaborates to us the conditions that have made necessary a commitment to internationalist anti-imperialist struggle. Just as it emerges thoroughly out of the historical conditions it analyzes, so too does it remind us that our work today demands an orthodoxy based in the international intensification of the class struggle – not only the lengths capital goes to avoid its ever more gaping grave, but to those mass actions of all the exploited that dig it.

⁷⁰ Luxemburg, *The Mass* 185.

⁷¹ Luxemburg, *The Mass* 194, 195.

⁷² Luxemburg, *The Mass* 199.