

Michael Brie

## Rosa Luxemburg's Symphony on the Russian Revolution

Leipzig, March 5 2011, on the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rosa Luxemburg's  
birthday

The unsolved task: 'No democracy without socialism, no  
socialism without democracy'

Rosa Luxemburg was an avid botanist. Beyond the fact that she studied biology next to social sciences and humanities, her entire life was marked by a strong attraction to nature. Her works are full of metaphors of wild landscapes and the power of life; her letters from prison speak of her yearning for free nature. Even ninety years after Rosa Luxemburg's death her thinking and her actions can still not be coldly classified and solidly ordered. Neither in the geometrically ordered gardens of the history of Marxist-Leninist thinking nor in the beautifully landscaped gardens of superficial liberalism does she find her place. Rosa Luxemburg's heritage is like free nature: disturbing, because the life within it opposes any rules. The suppression of this heritage was unsuccessful.<sup>1</sup> New shoots keep growing; they break even the hardest shell in the moment people begin to move forward again.<sup>2</sup> The heritage of this revolutionary does not allow us to rest. She breaks every *-ism* and only people who do not wish to understand the nature of her thinking and action talk about 'Luxemburgism'. But what is it that gives her work such power?

I would like to show this through her text *The Russian Revolution* written in early

- 
- 1 For the discussion surrounding her heritage see: Jörn Schütrumpf: *Rosa Luxemburg or: Die Freiheit der Andersdenkenden. Standpunkte* 1/2011 Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung ([http://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls\\_uploads/pdfs/Standpunkte/Standpunkte\\_01-2011.pdf](http://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/Standpunkte/Standpunkte_01-2011.pdf)).
  - 2 This sentence alludes to Max Weber. In 1917 Max Weber had warned of a totally bureaucratized society in which the 'animated machine' of bureaucratic organisation 'together with the inanimate machine' creates 'the shell of bondage which men will perhaps be forced to inhabit one day, as powerless as the Fellahs of ancient Egypt' (Max Weber: *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland. Zur politischen Kritik des Beamtentums und Parteiwesens*. In: Max Weber: *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*. Tübingen 1988, p. 332).

autumn 1918.<sup>3</sup> I will not attempt to relate this text to the actual historical situation faced by the Bolsheviks at the time; nor will I ask about the concrete knowledge Rosa Luxemburg had on individual steps taken by the Soviet government.<sup>4</sup> At the centre for me stands Rosa Luxemburg's goal with this text and not the role played by this text at least since it was published by Paul Levi in 1922.<sup>5</sup> I will ask which opinions she expresses and why are they so provoking. Without doubt, this is a very limited but nonetheless legitimate view.

Let us go back to the summer of 1918. Rosa Luxemburg was moved to the prison in Wrocław one year before. She has to put up with fresh maltreatment. Her health is ruined. One of her closest friends, Hans Diefenbach, falls at the front. The world is in commotion, in the east more than anywhere else, but she remains imprisoned. In Germany, resistance against the war is growing but there is no mass refusal to obey orders yet, and no councils and no revolution yet either. In Russia, her closest political allies, the Bolsheviks, have taken power and are struggling to impose socialism. Nevertheless, if we look at the articles written by Rosa Luxemburg at this time, the socialism she so yearned for appears to be distorting the ideals she is committed to. She deeply fears a new disappointment.

In this situation she does something utterly impossible. She circumvents the logic of *us or them* and so doing both appraises and criticises the Bolsheviks. She criticises them for not doing enough to abolish the roots of capitalism, hatred between peoples and war because the Bolsheviks gave land to the peasants, enabled subjugated peoples to gain independence as nations and signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Germans. Thereby, writes Rosa Luxemburg, they chose paths that did not *directly* lead to socialism and even took paths that could potentially discredit socialism. Harsher still is her criticism of the Bolsheviks' transition to dictatorship. A jotted note like a wild shoot on the side of her manuscript still resonates today: 'Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party – however numerous they may be – is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently. Not because of any fanatical concept of "justice" but because all that is instructive, wholesome and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic, and its effectiveness vanishes when "freedom" becomes a special privilege.'<sup>6</sup>

---

3 Annelies Laschitzka dates this text to September and October 1918. I too believe it was written in a very short time and in one go.

4 See Annelies Laschitzka: *Im Lebensrausch, trotz alledem. Rosa Luxemburg*. Berlin 2000, pp. 567–579. For the approach chosen here though it is irrelevant how objective her information was; what counts here is only how she interpreted the information available to her. My aim is not to judge how fair she is towards the Bolsheviks. Interesting to me are the judgements she makes based on the information she has and why she reaches these conclusions.

5 On the difference between the meanings an author attaches to a text and the meaning the text can gain in a certain context see Quentin Skinner: *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*, 1969. In: James Tully: *Meaning and Context. Quentin Skinner and his Critics*. Cambridge 1988, p. 44 ff.

6 Rosa Luxemburg: *Zur russischen Revolution (The Russian Revolution)*. In: *Werke*, vol. 4, p. 359.

Some say one ought not reduce Rosa Luxemburg to the sentence 'freedom for the one who thinks differently'. Reducing a thinker and politician like Rosa Luxemburg who has left such a large and complex compilation of texts to a single sentence is said to be either banal, or viewed as an attempt to remove the power from this sentence as if it had been purely ornamental, as if it had escaped Rosa Luxemburg accidentally in the heat of a polemic. Notwithstanding, she sees in the abolishment of democracy a disastrous instrument of Bolshevik policy and writes: 'for it stops up the very living source from which alone can come correction of all the innate shortcomings of social institutions. That source is the active, untrammelled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people.'<sup>7</sup> Again, she uses a metaphor that refers to free nature.

In the discussion of this note both 'friends and foes' often forget that Rosa Luxemburg did not simply criticise the Bolsheviks as undemocratic but also as not socialist. For reasons I will describe later in her view the two critiques are inseparable. To her it is unthinkable to first suspend democracy, then build the house of socialism and at a later point give the house's inhabitants the opportunity to discuss the fundamentals. In her understanding socialism and democracy are intrinsically related.

What is it that makes Rosa Luxemburg's legacy so disturbing even today? Why does 'untrammelled' life always break out anew where one does not want it? Why does this legacy not fit into the seemingly clear frontlines of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and what is it that precisely for this reason turns this legacy into such an inspiration for the renewal of socialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Why is it that one side as much as the other can co-opt her and why is it so hard for both sides to reduce Rosa Luxemburg's thinking to a simple formula? The reason, I believe, lies in the fact that Rosa Luxemburg tried to unite the concepts of socialism and democracy, which throughout the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seemed wholly incompatible. This attempt of hers, I believe, makes it necessary to radically revisit both socialism and democracy. Let me quote only a few, but therefore all the more important sentences from Ernst Bloch's book *Natural Law and Human Dignity*. He wrote these sentences with Rosa Luxemburg in mind: 'The ultimate quintessence of classical natural law, without all of the other accessories, remains the postulate of human dignity; man, and not only his class (as Brecht said), is not happy when he finds a boot in his face, [...] Thus we find the authentic inheritance of the natural law that was revolutionary: the abolition of all relations that have alienated man from things that have not only been reduced to being merchandise but are even stripped of all their own value [Ernst Bloch here clearly had in mind the experiences of the national socialist extermination of human beings and Stalinism – M.B.]. No democracy without socialism, no socialism without democracy - that is the formula of an interaction that will decide the future.'<sup>8</sup>

---

7 Ibid. p. 355.

8 Ernst Bloch: *Natural Law and Human Dignity*. Baskerville 1996, p. 203-204.

## The manuscript *The Russian Revolution* – a symphony of democratic socialism

Let us go back to the vibrant source of this 'formula': Rosa Luxemburg's manuscript *The Russian Revolution*. The trigger for this manuscript was a footnote by Ernst Meyer after Leo Jogiches, the editor of the *Spartacus Letters* was detained. In this footnote the author carefully but nonetheless clearly distances himself from Luxemburg's criticism of the Bolsheviks. The manuscript *The Russian Revolution* from early autumn 1918 is then an incomplete but nonetheless clearly structured and therefore nearly complete manuscript.

My approach in the analysis of this manuscript will not be to pick out individual arguments and contrast them with positions held by Lenin or Trotsky on the one side and Kautsky as their often quoted antipode on the other. What I aim for is a reconstruction of the context Rosa Luxemburg creates in the text. To this end, I will treat this small but very powerful work in its entirety. I will therefore look at it as if it were a symphony, with its classical four movements, composed as much through logic as by passion. My focus is not on the historic or current truths of Luxemburg's statements. I am more interested in the direction she was taking – in what Rosa Luxemburg wanted to say and not what was caused by what she said.

The manuscript *The Russian Revolution* begins and ends with an appraisal of the Russian revolution and the Bolsheviks. These are sections I and II and the final part – they can be interpreted as the first long and the short fourth movement of her 'symphony'. The first massive movement is like a beating drum presenting the theme: 'The Russian Revolution is the mightiest event of the World War'.<sup>9</sup> This theme is repeated numerous times. The appraisal of the role the Bolsheviks played in the revolution leads to the main theme: the Bolsheviks, she states, were the ones who understood that in Russia as much as in Europe, socialism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, was the order of the day. With their demand of all power to the Soviets, they had given the 'watch-words for driving the revolution ahead' and drawn 'all the necessary conclusions'.<sup>10</sup> They had shown the truth of the motto 'not through a majority, but through revolutionary tactics to a majority – that's the way the road runs'.<sup>11</sup> As Rosa Luxemburg writes the Bolsheviks had thereby 'won for themselves the imperishable historic distinction of having for the first time proclaimed the final aim of socialism as the direct program of practical politics'.<sup>12</sup>

The manuscript ends with an appraisal of the Bolsheviks stating that they had managed to go beyond 'questions of tactics' and instead focused on 'the most important problem of socialism': 'the capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such'.<sup>13</sup> Luxemburg ends her manuscript with the sentence:

---

9 Rosa Luxemburg: *Zur russischen Revolution (The Russian Revolution)*, p. 332.

10 Ibid., p. 340.

11 Ibid., p. 341. At the latest, Rosa Luxemburg drew this conclusion during the Russian Revolution of 1905/6. See: Rosa Luxemburg: *Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften (The Mass Strike)*. In: *Werke*, vol. 2, p. 91–170.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., p. 365.

'And in *this* sense, the future everywhere belongs to "Bolshevism"'.<sup>14</sup> One could also read this final sentence as: 'It is *only* in this sense, that the future everywhere belongs to "Bolshevism"'. The beat of the drum has become a fortepiano, played loudly at first, and then more quietly.

It is worth thinking about why Rosa Luxemburg did not focus on the seizure of power, the installation of a socialist government and the development of socialist institutions by the Bolsheviks in Russia as a Leitmotiv with which to start and end her text. Instead, she concentrated on the Bolsheviks' efficiency in developing the working class' and the Russian masses' capacity for revolutionary action. For her, this and only this was the lasting merit of the Leninist party. Her true interest rests with the millions of workers, peasants and soldiers building-up socialism from the grounds and not in the fact that the red flag was hoisted above the Kremlin. Here a side theme of her symphony begins to develop. As in earlier articles,<sup>15</sup> the goal of her analysis of Bolshevik policies – both of her criticism and her appraisal – is overcoming the 'fatal inertia of the German masses'.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of the Russian Bolsheviks, her manuscript is aimed at the 'inertia' of German workers. Her criticism of Russian soviet government policies hopes to lead Germany to achieve what she sees as the true accomplishment of the Bolsheviks in Russia: revolutionary socialist action of the masses.

But according to her this cannot be 'called forth in the spirit of the guardianship methods of the German Social-Democracy of late-lamented memory. It can never again be conjured forth by any spotless authority, be it that of our own "higher committees" or that of "the Russian example"'.<sup>17</sup> She is convinced that 'not by the creation of a revolutionary hurrah-spirit, but quite the contrary: only by an insight into all the fearful seriousness, all the complexity of the tasks involved, only as a result of political maturity and independence of spirit, only as a result of a capacity for critical judgement on the part of the masses, whose capacity was systematically suppressed by the Social-Democracy for decades under various pretexts, only thus can the genuine capacity for historical

---

14 Ibid.

15 All of her articles on the Russian Revolution between spring 1917 and autumn 1918 asks with increasing desperation when the German proletariat will finally fulfil its historic duty for socialist revolution. See for example *Die Revolution in Russland (The Revolution in Russia)*, *Der alte Maulwurf (The Old Mole)*, *Zwei Osterbotschaften*, *Brennende Zeitfragen*, *Die geschichtliche Verantwortung*, *Der Katastrophe entgegen* and finally *Die russische Tragödie (The Russian Tragedy)* (with the aforementioned note by Ernst Meyer), an article that concludes with the words: 'There is only one solution to the tragedy in which Russia is caught up: an uprising at the rear of German imperialism, the German mass rising, which can signal the international revolution to put an end to this genocide. At this fateful moment, preserving the honour of the Russian Revolution [in the eyes of Rosa Luxemburg this honour was endangered by the separate peace between Soviet Russia and the German Empire in Brest-Litovsk – Michael Brie] is identical with vindicating that of the German proletariat and of international socialists. Rosa Luxemburg: *Die russische Tragödie. (The Russian Tragedy)* Werke, vol. 4, p. 392.

16 Rosa Luxemburg: *Zur russischen Revolution (The Russian Revolution)*, p. 335.

17 Ibid., p. 335.

action be born in the German proletariat. To concern one's self with a critical analysis of the Russian Revolution in all its historical connections is the best training for the German and the international working class for the tasks which confront them as an outgrowth of the present situation.'<sup>18</sup>

In summary: whereas Luxemburg's manuscript *The Russian Revolution* chiefly appraises the Bolsheviks' success in finding the right slogans to move and provide the masses with a focus towards revolutionary action, she also follows a second goal, namely to criticise Bolshevik policies precisely there where they stand against this understanding of socialism as a creation by the workers themselves toward common property. Both high esteem *and* harsh criticism of the historic accomplishment of the Bolsheviks are measured by the same standard. For Rosa Luxemburg socialism always essentially depends on one thing: 'The whole mass of the people must take part in it'.<sup>19</sup> This measure binds the manuscript together and provides the basis of both her appraisal and criticism of the Bolsheviks.

Whilst the first long part of Luxemburg's manuscript appraises the Bolsheviks, sections III and IV concentrate on criticism. She focuses her criticism of the Bolsheviks on three central aspects: First, agrarian reform, second the proclamation of the right of nations to self-determination and the separate peace<sup>20</sup> with Germany, and third the 'suppression of democracy'<sup>21</sup>. The first two points are discussed in section III, and the third point in section IV; both are nearly equally long. These are the movements two and three of Luxemburg's symphony *The Russian Revolution*.

### Her criticism of the Bolsheviks: Too little socialism, too little democracy

Without the necessary space to look into the details of Rosa Luxemburg's criticism of Bolshevik policies,<sup>22</sup> I will restrict myself to pointing to one unusual aspect of this criticism. As it were, both sections seem to oppose each other in an unbridgeable logical contradiction. First, the Bolsheviks are criticised for their policies on easing tensions between the government and possible opponents. Then she develops proposals that – one must assume – would have increased resistance to the Bolsheviks. Finally, she recommends the Bolsheviks implement radical political democratisation. Let us look at

---

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid, p. 360.

20 For more on this peace accord, see *Die geschichtliche Verantwortung* and *Die russische Tragödie (The Russian Tragedy)*, that for unknown reasons appear after *Zur russischen Revolution (The Russian Revolution)*, in *Werke*.

21 Rosa Luxemburg: *Zur russischen Revolution (The Russian Revolution)*, p. 352.

22 Besides the text by Rosa Luxemburg herself see also the introduction of volume 4 of the complete works edition from 1974 as well as the introduction by Annelies Laschitza in: Institut für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung (eds): *Rosa Luxemburg und die Freiheit der Andersdenkenden. Extraausgabe des unvollendeten Manuskripts 'Zur russischen Revolution' und anderer Quellen zur Polemik mit Lenin*. Edition and introduction by Annelies Laschitza. Berlin 1990, pp. 7–32.

this contradiction more closely.

In section III the Bolsheviks are criticised for their agrarian reform and nationality policies. Rosa Luxemburg criticises the Bolsheviks' decision to give peasants land for their own private benefit and to grant the suppressed peoples of the Russian Empire the right to self-determination. She neither wants to strengthen private property, nor nationalist divisions. Rosa Luxemburg understood that 'as a political measure to fortify the proletarian socialist government' the Bolshevik policy criticised by her '[...] was an excellent tactical move'<sup>23</sup> aimed at binding 'the numerous nations to the cause of the revolution'.<sup>24</sup> In both cases the Bolsheviks yielded to the pressure of a large share of the population, be it the peasants, the Finns, Estonians, Lithuanians, or Georgians and so forth. Furthermore, the so-called peace of Brest-Litovsk grew mainly out of the incapacity of the Bolsheviks to continue mobilising soldiers for the war effort. Any other policy would have, at least according to Lenin, either made it impossible for the Bolsheviks to seize power or would have led to their rapid demise. Why then did Rosa Luxemburg criticise these decisions so harshly?

For Rosa Luxemburg Bolshevik power was to a certain degree probably a less pressing issue than saving the honour of the left. Although she does not say this directly, in my view I think she would have found it easier to accept the downfall of Bolshevik Russia than to witness a further betrayal of socialist ideals as had been committed by right-wing social democrats in 1914. This is especially true with regard to the prospects for the in her eyes decisive socialist revolutions in Germany and Western Europe. Faced with the possibility that the Leninist government, which found itself in a hopeless situation in autumn 1918, might consider an alliance with the German Empire to secure its power, she wrote: 'Russia was the one last corner where revolutionary socialism, purity of principle and ideals, still held away. It was a place to which all sincere socialist elements in Germany and Europe could look in order to find relief from the disgust they felt at the practice of the West European labour movement, in order to arm themselves with the courage to persevere and in faith in pure actions and sacred words. The grotesque 'coupling' of Lenin and Hindenburg would extinguish the source of moral light in the east.'<sup>25</sup> Whoever writes like this, with such an appeal to absolute values, makes it clear they aim for all or nothing.

Although Rosa Luxemburg is conscious of the political reasons behind Lenin's policies, she nonetheless recommended the Bolsheviks follow a strategy that would have placed them even more strongly in opposition to the population, in particular to peasants, soldiers and the periphery of the former Russian Tsardom. She assumed that any real steps towards a real socialist policy must at least not 'bar' or 'cut off' the road leading to socialism.<sup>26</sup> Evidently, she envisages this socialism in the context of the predominance of

---

23 Ibid., p. 342.

24 Ibid., p. 348.

25 Rosa Luxemburg: *Die russische Tragödie (The Russian Tragedy)*, p. 390.

26 See on her terminology: *Zur russischen Revolution (The Russian Revolution)*, p. 343.

social property and the immediate international solidarity of peoples within a unified Soviet state. Rosa Luxemburg could not accept the strengthening of peasant private property and the bolstering of the self-determination of peoples that had already been part of the economic and market areas dominated by Russia. She viewed the small property owners and the new small 'nation states' as the natural partners of imperialism and counter-revolution.<sup>27</sup>

In the second movement of her symphony, to stick to this metaphor, Rosa Luxemburg recommends the Bolsheviks adopt a communist policy of centralisation and concentration of economic and political power grounded in robust principles and in opposition to what she calls the 'spontaneous peasant movement'<sup>28</sup> and the 'bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes'<sup>29</sup> of the suppressed nations. She sees the reasons behind the Bolshevik policies that in her view contradict socialist principles grounded on strategic power interests and assumes that 'unfortunately, the calculation was entirely wrong'.<sup>30</sup> Historically this turned out to be a misjudgement, even though in early autumn 1918 many facts seemed to indicate that Lenin's government would fall. The Bolsheviks though were able to maintain power for 70 years; also thanks to the German and Austrian revolutions of November 1918, the outcomes of the civil war, and great internal and external concessions (the New Economic Policy) as well as accelerated industrialisation and expropriation of peasants (called 'collectivisation') in the late 1920ies and early 1930ies.

More interesting in our context though is the fact that Rosa Luxemburg proposed measures in the second movement, which from the point of view of the Bolsheviks would have created greater opposition among the masses of Russian peasants and the Russian periphery. Yet in the third movement, she strongly refutes precisely the measures taken by the Bolsheviks to stabilise their power in the face of already existing opposition: dictatorship and terror. It seems Rosa Luxemburg believed that it was possible to simultaneously implement a policy of the immediate socialisation of the means of production (in the city and partly in the countryside) *as well as* a policy of all-encompassing democratisation. Socialist democracy and the establishment of democratic socialism should go hand-in-hand.<sup>31</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg saw the separation of interests in any area of the economy as strengthening private property. Equally, she believed that allowing entire peoples to leave the imperial constructs into which they had been economically integrated constituted a division of the working class. She was also against any alliance with the internal or foreign bourgeoisie. But at the same time, she demanded freedom of speech and assembly, and elections that were open to the participation of the government's opponents.

---

27 Ibid., p. 344 f. and p. 350.

28 Ibid., p. 344.

29 Ibid., p. 348.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., p. 363.

Rigorously and fundamentally, she therefore emphasized: 'Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution' and that it led to 'the dictatorship of a handful of politicians'.<sup>32</sup> This dictatorship she then characterizes as 'bourgeois' precisely because it is a 'dictatorship for a handful of people'.<sup>33</sup> She justifies this again by solving the antagonism between dictatorship and democracy in her own way: 'The proletariat, when it seizes power, can never follow the good advice of Kautsky, given on the pretext of the "unripeness of the country," the advice being to renounce socialist revolution and devote itself to democracy. It cannot follow this advice without betraying thereby itself, the International, and the revolution. It should and must at once undertake socialist measures in the most energetic, unyielding and unhesitant fashion, in other words, exercise a dictatorship, but a dictatorship of the *class*, not of a party or of a clique – dictatorship of the class, that means in the broadest possible form on the basis of the most active, unlimited participation of the mass of the people, of unlimited democracy.'<sup>34</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg sees the reason behind the failure of the Bolsheviks to gain broad support – and this in spite of the numerous concessions they made – alone in the fundamental opposition to socialism of the bourgeoisie, petty-bourgeoisie and peasants. She argues that the departure from socialist principles cost the Bolsheviks the support of the masses of workers and strengthened counter-revolutionary forces. She writes: 'Instead of warning the proletariat in the border countries against all forms of separatism as mere bourgeois traps, they did nothing but confuse the masses in all the border countries by their slogan and delivered them up to the demagogy of the bourgeois classes. By this nationalistic demand they brought on the disintegration of Russia itself, pressed into the enemy's hand the knife which it was to thrust into the heart of the Russian Revolution.'<sup>35</sup>

### The anticipated harmony of opposites: Needs and freedom

But how can this work? Use of the 'iron hand' of 'proletarian dictatorship' to suppress all interests not immediately in line with a socialism understood like this *and* 'freedom of the press', 'the right to association and assembly'<sup>36</sup>, implementing measures in an 'unyielding and unhesitant fashion' whilst allowing 'unlimited democracy'? Rosa Luxemburg, it appears, wants something that is impossible and she even wants it democratically. Sections III and IV – or the second and third movement of her 'symphony' – stand in clear opposition to each other. The suppression of all social and nation state plurality *and* the highest appraisal of political freedom; the struggle with an iron hand against all private possession of land and against splitting Russia *and* the greatest possible

---

32 Ibid., p. 362.

33 Ibid., p. 362.

34 Ibid., p. 362 f.

35 Ibid., p. 350 f.

36 Ibid., p. 358.

promotion of political freedom and democracy as the 'living sources of all spiritual riches and progress'.<sup>37</sup> Historically at least these opposites fell apart. Whereas bourgeois-capitalist society and political democracy proved to be at least temporarily compatible, this was not the case for the type of socialism characterised by a centrally planned, nationalised economy with free elections.

Rosa Luxemburg overcame these contradictions; in the end, she united them and created true harmony from two opposed movements. This unity was only possible because she was convinced that through their everyday practices that workers and the masses would change the 'thousands of complicated difficulties' that develop while constructing socialism into 'unobstructed, effervescing life'.<sup>38</sup> 'Social instincts in place of egotistical ones, mass initiative in place of inertia, idealism which conquers all suffering, etc., etc.'<sup>39</sup> would develop. She believed that these instincts and initiatives as well as the necessary idealism would take society in exactly the direction of the form of socialism she proposed. Therefore, she could also envisage that the greatest degree of freedom would lead to the greatest degree of insight into the truth of socialism as a society of socialised property, common interests, internationalism and peace.

But Rosa Luxemburg also seems to have believed that the opposite too is true. By stopping peasants, if necessary by force, from privately appropriating land and forcing them into collective forms of production, by not granting national independence to the peoples of the Russian Empire but instead keeping them within a political and economic sphere where they work together in socialised factories, and participate in the development and implementation of production plans, a space for experiences develops that will lead to the acceptance of socialism. According to her, this would lead to support for socialism and its enthusiastic defence. In particular, her discussion of the national question points in this direction.<sup>40</sup> Driven by bourgeois nationalists she believes the separation into different peoples develops into hatred. She seems to have thought that even if unity in a revolutionised country was implemented in the beginning where necessary by force, acceptance of this unity would later develop.

In Rosa Luxemburg the free action by the masses and historic necessity have a tendency to go hand-in-hand. Leadership then, is mainly the capacity to actively promote this development. To her, dictatorship and terror are the deadly enemies of socialism because by suppressing freedom of action by the masses they equally suppress the real agents of any enforcement of socialist demands. Dictators are the gravediggers of socialism because they bury the agents of socialism in the prison of a command society from which there can be no path towards the realm of freedom.

In contrast to Lenin and Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg simply did not believe that spontaneously-arising convictions would necessarily lead away from socialism and that

---

37 Ibid., p. 360.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., p. 361.

40 To me this discussion and the positions she develops therein are important sources showing the positions she held in 1918.

there was therefore a need to install socialist 'consciousness' in the working class from outside (something Lenin was willing to do even by force). Instead, she believed that the everyday practices of workers and the working masses would lead directly to socialism – at least if such a practice were free and built on autonomous action and not on paternalism and manipulation. Furthermore, there would have to be a true unity of production and life. As Rosa Luxemburg had already argued against Lenin in 1904: 'The Social Democratic movement is the first in the history of class societies which reckons, in all its phases and through its entire course, on the organization and the direct, independent action of the masses.'<sup>41</sup> To her socialism is not a centrally planned machine. Instead, it is life, free action by free men and women united by direct cooperation. Should such a relation between direct experience and socialist goals – conceived as the socialisation of the means of production – really exist, then, and only then, would the dictatorship of a party and terror not only be morally wrong but also the wrong means of building political power. Rosa Luxemburg repeatedly emphasized this. What she did not realise though, is that if socialism is understood as a centralised social economy then it is diametrically opposed to the free action of the masses.<sup>42</sup> Yet Rosa Luxemburg never critically reflected on the necessary pre-conditions for her assumptions on socialism, and instead only pointed to some concrete problems.

### For the 21<sup>st</sup> century: a different kind of socialism and a different kind of democracy

Rosa Luxemburg's criticism of the Bolsheviks in my view stems both from a clear vision of what socialism ought to be like, that is, a society of general social property *as much as* from the point of view of a movement that must gain all its power from the development of the agency of the oppressed and that can only then establish the necessary criteria on which decisions can be made. This contradiction between socialism as a concept of common property and a living movement characterises her whole work and remains unsolved until her violent death. She therefore stood at the heart of a movement that considered the liberation of the workers needed to be achieved by the workers themselves, although paternalism and even the suppression of these workers later became a characteristic trait of this movement.

I believe that the experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have shown ■ that the socialisation of the means of production, their direct subordination under 'all workers' proved counterproductive ■ that any attempt to suppress diversity, to create an 'immediate' identity of social, collective and individual interests, the reduction to a single type of subject – even if this is 'the worker' – only surpasses the opposition between

---

41 Rosa Luxemburg: *Organisationsfragen der russischen Sozialdemokratie (Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy)*. In: *Werke*, vol. 1.2, p. 427.

42 This unsolved contradiction also characterises the text *Was will der Spartakusbund (What does the Spartacus League Want?)* (*Werke*, vol. 4, pp. 442–451) and her short article *Die Sozialisierung der Gesellschaft (The Socialisation of Society)* (*ibid.*, pp. 433–436).

capital and labour to produce new kinds of antagonisms ■ that this leads to new forms of domination and alienation ■ that such an order proves itself to be inferior to other forms of regulating property ■ that this has a structural basis and does not constitute a positive abolishment of capitalist modes of production.<sup>43</sup>

If this is the case then the kind of socialism in which all power is 'delegated' to a single centre can never be democratic, because all freedom must then direct itself against such a system. Restructuring (Perestroika) and democratisation represented the setting sun on this kind of socialism. Nonetheless, it is also true: To the extent that the economy is democratised, and decisions over property are taken democratically and investment decisions are no longer left to the owners of capital alone, the sun will also begin to set on bourgeois-capitalist society; only that so far this has always been successfully prevented, where necessary by force. Popular power – and what else can democracy mean – demands that the people also govern a society's economic processes. This though is the end of any form of capitalism. However, the path to this will not be reached by overcoming all conflicts of interests but instead by replacing antagonistic approaches with cooperative methods of dealing with these conflicts, which implies profound changes to power and property relations and repelling the dominant role of profit.<sup>44</sup>

If this is correct, then the formula 'no democracy without socialism, no socialism without democracy' is the unsolved problem of 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism. I firmly believe this question requires rethinking the strong connection between socialism and the socialisation of all means of production<sup>45</sup> and the attempt to create a *mono-subject*<sup>46</sup> or even larger numbers of *mono-subjects* that are free of internal contradictions. The plurality of legitimate property interests (employees, environmental associations, consumers, communal bodies and regions, management, representatives of creditors, not least state institutions etc.) and the plurality of such contradictory subjects must necessarily become part of this form of socialism. It is an order that strives towards the free appropriation of the wealth of society through the association of associated individuals and must be based on numerous and complex forms of ownership and private companies. Moreover, such a socialism must provide a basis for solidarity in which such contradictions can be reconciled.<sup>47</sup> First, the general basis for production and life (the

---

43 For a more in-depth discussion see: Michael Brie: *Der sowjetische Staatspartei Sozialismus im Lichte der Marxschen Theorie 'progressiver Epochen der ökonomischen Gesellschaftsformation'*. In: Kalbe, Ernstgert; Geier, Wolfgang; Politt, Holger (eds): *Aufstieg und Fall des Staatssozialismus: Ursachen und Wirkungen. Leipziger Jahrbücher: Osteuropa in Tradition und Wandel*, vol. 6, Leipzig 2004, pp. 197–233.

44 For a more in-depth discussion see: Dieter Klein: *Eine zweite große Transformation und die Linke*. Kontrovers published by Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, May 2010; Mario Candeias: *Passive Revolution vs. sozialistische Transformationen*. Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Papers 2010.

45 Ruben, Peter: *Die Kommunistische Antwort auf die soziale Frage*. Berliner Debate Initial. no 1/1998, pp. 5–18.

46 For a more in-depth analysis see: Michael Brie: *Die Erarbeitung einer Konzeption des modernen Sozialismus – Thesen in der Diskussion*. Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie. no. 3/1990, pp. 218–229.

47 See: *Wer ist Eigentümer im Sozialismus* (written mostly between 1983 and 1985, published

resources of the earth, culture, knowledge, public services, the financial and legal systems etc.) would have to be placed under the public and democratic control of citizens. Only then could the economy be democratised and politics become social. Then, it is to be hoped, the practical experiences of the producers of the wealth of society would really spontaneously push towards democratic socialism. Unlimited public reflection on these experiences would produce the conscious steps towards a society of solidarity and justice that never stops reinventing itself.

This socialism would be a vibrant, diverse society and very close to what Rosa Luxemburg describes, the Rosa Luxemburg about whom Paul Levi wrote in 1922: 'Her deeply balanced soul knew no differentiation and separating walls. To her the universe was a living process of becoming in which leverage and oxygen containers cannot replace the prevalence of nature, in which the struggles and aspirations of people, the sexes, social stands and classes were the *form* of this becoming. She did not want people not to struggle, and leave everything to develop as it develops. She wanted the most sincere struggle because to her this struggle is the most sincere form of becoming'.<sup>48</sup>

---

during the end of the GDR, in Berlin in 1990) and: *Die wiederentdeckte Eigentumsfrage*. In: Michael Brie (ed): *Mit Marx ins 21. Jahrhundert. Kritik des Neoliberalismus und Alternativen*. Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Papers 04/2006, pp. 77–102.

48 Paul Levi: Introduction to *Die Russische Revolution. Eine kritische Würdigung*. Aus dem Nachlass von Rosa Luxemburg. In: Institut für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung (ed): *Rosa Luxemburg und die Freiheit der Andersdenkenden*. *ibid.*, p. 223 f.