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Socialism *and* Democracy

Looking for a new synthesis

Abstract

In his analysis (2011) of Rosa Luxemburg's "The Russian Revolution", Brie assumes that her understanding of socialism when criticizing the politics of the Bolsheviks, emblematic of the Second International, clearly conflicted with Luxemburg's vision of democratic politics being a dynamic process of political learning based on solidarity. In 1917/19, it was the real alternative of either renouncing *this* conception of socialism or establishing a permanent political dictatorship. This paper discusses what it would mean to develop an alternative concept of socialism based on Luxemburg's understanding of democracy, and highlights approaches in her last writings during the German Revolution of 1918-19.

"No democracy without socialism, no socialism without democracy, that is the formula of an interaction which decides upon the future"
Ernst Bloch (2007: 232).

After the Bolsheviks assumed political power on 7 November 1917, Rosa Luxemburg criticized their politics on two grounds: On the one hand, she did not perceive it to be consistently socialist *nor* did it present radical democratic views at the same time (Brie 2011). A topical question of each socialist movement of the 21st century that has repeatedly been ignored is whether the understanding of socialism as perceived by Rosa Luxemburg and many of her comrades *could* at all be linked with the democracy she so vehemently demanded. If it was not possible to develop *this* kind of socialism in a democratic manner, the formula of "democratic socialism" can therefore no longer be regarded as something trivial; instead, it requires a rethinking of both democracy *and* socialism in equal measures. While various publications have comprehensively analysed the way Rosa Luxemburg contributed to the establishment of a radical socialist democracy, her understanding of socialism has, in comparison, rarely been the subject of critical review.

When criticizing the Bolsheviks in "The Russian Revolution", Rosa Luxemburg clearly sets her standards for socialism. She saw Bolshevik policy as being anything but socialist, above all with regard to agriculture and nationality. She believed that "the direct, immediate seizure and distribution of the land by the peasants was the shortest, simplest, most clean-cut formula to achieve two diverse things: to break down large land-ownership, and immediately to bind the peasants to the revolutionary government" (Luxemburg 2004a: 290). However, she added "[...] the reverse side consisted in the fact that the direct seizure of the land by the peasants has in general nothing at all in common with socialist economy" (ibid; emphasis is mine). According to her, socialist agricultural management was characterized by "unions in cooperatives" and finally "inclusion in the general socialized economy as a whole" (ibid) and "mutual interpenetration" of industry and agriculture. It was managed by "urban communes" or "directed from a governmental center" (ibid: 291). She also believed that the Bolsheviks had abandoned socialist principles as reflected in their policy concerning nationalities. She wrote: "Instead of acting in the same spirit of genuine international class policy which they represented in other matters, instead of working for the most compact union of the revolutionary forces throughout the area of the Empire, instead of defending tooth and nail the integrity of the Russian Empire as an area of revolution and opposing to all forms of separatism the solidarity and inseparability of the proletarians in all lands within the sphere of the Russian Revolution as the highest command of politics, the Bolsheviks, by their hollow nationalistic phraseology concerning the 'right of self-determination to the point of separation', have accomplished quite the contrary and supplied the bourgeoisie in all border states with the finest, the most desirable pretext,

the very banner of the counter-revolutionary efforts” (ibid: 297).

For Rosa Luxemburg and all theorists of the Second International standing in the tradition of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “socialism” entailed the transitioning of the economy to a “general socialized economy as a whole” on the basis of uniform, supra-national class interests of the proletariat and under its leadership. The classical yet largely unknown reasoning for this idea was provided by Karl Marx himself in 1880. In his introduction of the French Workers’ Party election campaign he stated:

“Considering,

That the emancipation of the productive class is that of all human beings without distinction of sex or race;

That the producers can be free only when they are in possession of the means of production;

That there are only two forms under which the means of production can belong to them

1. The individual form which has never existed in a general state and which is increasingly eliminated by industrial progress;
2. The collective form the material and intellectual elements of which are constituted by the very development of capitalist society;

Considering,

That this collective appropriation can arise only from the revolutionary action of the productive class – or proletariat – organized in a distinct political party;

That a such an organization must be pursued by all the means the proletariat has at its disposal including universal suffrage which will thus be transformed from the instrument of deception that it has been until now into an instrument of emancipation;

The French socialist workers, in adopting as the aim of their efforts the political and economic expropriation of the capitalist class and the return to community of all the means of production, have decided, as a means of organization and struggle, to enter the elections with the following immediate demands: [...]” (Marx 1975b).

Direct individual appropriation was to be prevented by the people becoming owners of the production. This was to be achieved by the entirety of the associated workers appropriating the means of production for the society. The working class gained political power in form of a political party and was to allow direct producers to (re-)appropriate the means of production (see the classical deduction in “Capital” – Marx 1996: 535–536; with regard to the interpretation of this deduction, see Brie 1990b: 102–109). What the private individual was deprived of due to the emergence of modern social ownership of the means of production¹, benefitted the associated worker “in his capacity as a member of society” (Marx 1975a: 85). Marx and Engels were well aware of some underlying contradictions. The hope for freedom arising from collective ownership would be opposed by the “despotism” of the large factory (Engels 1972: 731). The fact that a “given amount of labour” was then replaced by a share in the work products was associated with a “bourgeois limitation” as measurement was ensured with an “*equal standard, labour*” (Marx 1975a: 86). These contradictions were to be discussed according to the principle of direct democracy and in form of councils, and following the example of cooperatives and the Paris Commune (see Marx 1985, 1986). The need for the organized working class to gain political power and the enforcement of social ownership

¹ This is contrasted with the concept of individualist anarchism developed by William Godwin at the end of the 18th century. According to William Godwin, neither the state nor private individuals must become owners of social goods, but are “merely administrators” being unconditionally obliged to ensure that everyone has free access to the basic goods of a “good life”. Individual appropriation has primacy over all forms of social ownership of means of production and consumption. William Godwin pays a high socio-philosophical price for his radical ideas. Demands made of the individuals’ reason and the capacity to voluntarily subject oneself to the imperatives of common interests are enormous. Godwin provides an example: “Shall each man manufacture his tools, furniture and accommodations? This would perhaps be a tedious operation. Each man performs the task to which he is accustomed, more skillfully, and in a shorter time than another. It is reasonable that you should make for me, that which perhaps I should be three or four times as long in making, and should make imperfectly at last. Shall we then introduce barter and exchange? By no means. The moment I require any further reason for supplying you, than the cogency of your claim, the moment, in addition to the dictates of benevolence, I demand a prospect of reciprocal advantage to myself, there is an end of that political justice and pure society of which we treat” (Godwin 1793: 295 et seq.).

under the condition that “united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon common plan” (Marx 1986: 335) were, according to Marx and Engels, “unavoidable as a means of entirely revolutionising the mode of production” (Marx und Engels 1976: 506) and, above all, meaningful.

Revolutionising a society’s modes of production and reproduction and the individual’s way of life was to pave the way for conditions that would do away with the foundation of antagonistic social divisions (not only of the classes). In his “Critique of the Gotha Programme”, Marx clearly identified the foundations of such conditions: “the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour”, the fact that labour was above all “a means of life” and not “life’s prime want”, that there was no all-round development of the individual, and therefore the “springs of common wealth” could not flow abundantly (Marx 1975a: 87). With the dismissal of these foundations of the “old society”, he firmly believed, individual development would directly become part of society and social development would thus directly be one of the universal riches of free individuality. An “association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” would then emerge (Marx und Engels 1976: 507). From this perspective, there would be no need for institutions to deal with social contradictions. The market and the state, money and law could die; access to ownership and power would lose importance, as everyone would have it and every attempt to limit the one would directly hinder the development of the other.

Rosa Luxemburg followed precisely this tradition of communist thinking of Marx and Engels, together with all other Marxist theorists of the Second International – from Kautsky to Lenin, from Otto Bauer to Plekhanov. In line with these ideas, she rejected the notion that the governing Bolsheviks conceded that they were “against all forms of separatism” (Luxemburg 2004a: 297) whilst rejecting the creation of a class of rural private owners, who will defend their newly won property with tooth and nail against every socialist attack” (ibid: 292). She aimed to establish an (internationalist) unity of the working class and to economically combine the peoples’ interests – proletarian and non-proletarian – based on the transition to social common property. She could not imagine deep inner inconsistencies in the interests of a working class that had taken political leadership (unlike Lenin). Inconsistencies of this nature were – if she took note of them – subjective and a result of the leaders’ failures: “The difficulty”, she wrote, “lies in the proletariat itself, in its immaturity, or rather the immaturity of its leaders, the socialist parties. The working class resists, it keeps shying away from its undefined and enormous task. But it *must*, it *must*. History deprives it of all excuses – to lead the ill-treated humanity from night and horror to the light of liberation” (Luxemburg 1974: 373).

The German revolution of 1918 directly made the “socialisation of society” (the title of one of Rosa Luxemburg’s articles) the order of the day for the socialist left. It was necessary to transform the most important means of production directly into “national property” and “place them under the control of society” (Luxemburg 2004b: 346). Higher labour productivity, a general obligation to work², the restructuring away from armament and “*luxury industries*“, reduced working hours, healthy working conditions, and the introduction of “all methods of recuperation and a variety of work [...], that everyone enjoys doing their part” (ibid: 347) are cited by Rosa Luxemburg as conditions necessary to permanently change the economic relationship. Finally, even small private owners would believe in socialism: “In time they will come to us voluntarily and will recognize the merits of socialism against private property” (ibid: 347). With the “whip” of hunger and capitalist supervision gone, these “great reforms [...] include a *corresponding human material*” (ibid: 435): “One cannot realize socialism with lazy, frivolous, egoistic, thoughtless and indifferent human beings. A socialist society needs human beings who, whatever their place, are full of passion and enthusiasm for the general well-being, full of self-sacrifice and sympathy for their fellow human beings, full of courage and tenacity in order to dare to attempt the most difficult” (ibid: 348).

The Spartacus League programme developed by Rosa Luxemburg takes up these positions. It was also largely adopted as party programme by the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) founded at

² The policy paper “What does the Spartacus League want?” immediately called for the “maximum working day of six hours” (Luxemburg 2004c: 355).

the turn of 1918/19. Its aim was a socialist society in which “the great laboring mass ceases to be a dominated mass, but rather, makes the entire political and economic life its own life and gives that life a conscious, free, and autonomous direction” (Luxemburg 2004c: 350). From a political perspective, this was to be ensured by organizing representative bodies through councils as “class organs” of workers and soldiers. Here, Rosa Luxemburg emphasized: “Only through constant, vital, reciprocal contact between the masses of the people and their organs, the workers’ and soldiers’ councils, can the activity of the people fill the state with a socialist spirit” (ibid: 351). The economic revolution can only be accomplished from below “by proletarian mass action” (ibid). And in stark contrast to ideas she saw embodied in the Bolsheviks and the right wing of social democracy alike, she wrote: “The proletarian revolution requires no terror for its aims; it hates and despises killing. It does not need these weapons because it does not combat individuals but institutions, because it does not enter the arena with naïve illusions whose disappointment it would seek to revenge. It is not the desperate attempt of a minority to mold the world forcibly according to its ideal, but the action of the great massive millions of the people, destined to fulfill a historic mission and to transform historical necessity into reality” (ibid: 352).

Communist attempts to implement socialist goals (as part of the implementation of a centrally managed economy), have not only failed in the 20th century; they also went hand in hand with a large-scale disempowerment of workers and the masses, requiring terror, closed borders, and the oppression of freedom of speech, assembly and organisation. The promise that, compared to capitalism, a higher “labour productivity” would be achieved, was not kept. Socialism, based on centrally managed common property, and democracy were not compatible. This socialism did not fail because it lacked democratic principles, but because of its structural *incapacity* to achieve democracy. The common property of the monolithic state was a product of the intellectual, political and economical mono-subject (Brie 1990a: 222) – from party-state dictatorship over the working class and the nation as a whole – and was only reproduced by means of this dictatorship. The “mere immediacy”, imagined by Marx and assumed for communism, “without money, state, law, politics, profit [...] has taken itself ad absurdum in the immediacy of Stalinist power” (Land 1990: 17). The fact that modern bourgeois societies identified themselves with capitalist societies in the Marxism of the Second International resulted in the fact that, during communist revolutions, “the general dimension of civil society” (Krüger 1990: 204) was destroyed. Not only could Rosa Luxemburg’s vision that radical democratisation and comprehensive socialisation could take place *at the same time* (as part of transforming the means of production into centralized common property) not be realized, the idea that it could take place *successively*, which Otto Bauer still thought to be possible in 1937, was also doomed to fail. Otto Bauer believed that the temporary suspension of democracy and the use of dictatorial means were a prerequisite for a transition from capitalism to socialism and an inevitable “means of the proletarian struggle for liberation” (Bauer 1936: 209). Impressed by the achievements in industrialisation of the first two Five-Year plans, he believed that the “restoration of a higher development level of democracy – the collective property” (ibid) was an open task that was soon to be resolved in the Soviet Union. Restoring democracy under Mikhail Gorbachev, however, led to the dissolution of the collective, in other words, party-state ownership. Democratic socialism based on centrally managed state ownership finally proved to be an illusion.

When discussing the establishment of a party dictatorship by the Bolsheviks, Rosa Luxemburg referred to natural law and liberal heritage, to the fact that individuals must not be exploited but always viewed in terms of their dignity and humanity, and to political freedoms – from the abolition of the death penalty, and the prohibition of the use of terror as a political tool, to fundamental political freedom. She focused on everything that the labour movement and other social movements fought for, but also against those who were usurping freedom as a privilege of the few. She insisted: “[...] it is a well-known and indisputable fact that without a free and untrammelled press, without the unlimited right of association and assemblage, the rule of the broad masses of the people is entirely unthinkable” (Luxemburg 2004a: 304).

If, however, political freedom and the citizens’ democratic self-determination are tied to this great liberal heritage, the question emerges as to whether another part of this heritage must remain in a society that is based on solidarity and emancipation: the protection of individuals as owners and their freedom to form a group of associated owners. The concept of liberalism implies that each individual becomes an owner. The second draft of the *Code Civil*, submitted on 9 September 1794, was developed during the French Revolution and is a fundamental document in the codification of

capitalist property. It reads “Three things are necessary and sufficient for man and society: to be master of his person, to have goods to meet his needs, to be able to dispose of his person and his goods in his greatest interests. All civil rights reduce themselves therefore to the rights of liberty, of property, and of contract” (quoted in Goy 1988: 726).

Karl Marx believed that a return to “individual property” was only possible on the basis of “the possession in common of the land and of the means of production” (Marx 1996: 750). Only in “their capacity as members of the society” and co-owners of the society as a whole could individuals become owners at all”. This, however, leads to the individual’s economic power being delegated to the society as a whole, and thus entrusted to a minority whose control structure is doomed to fail. As the controllers lack their own economic power to act, it was inevitable that democratic models would become nothing but a mere façade of dictatorship.

As we have seen in the 20th century, the formula of the unity of socialism and democracy is only valid if the individual’s freedom is ensured equally from an economic, political and intellectual perspective. If socialism and democracy are to be combined, it is necessary to systematically combine the liberal and the communist heritage. The deadly enemies of the 20th century must become part of a solidarity-based family for the 21st century. The fundamental goods needed for a free life, the freedom goods of a society based on solidarity must be accessible for each individual according to the communist principle of “Each according to his needs”. As convincingly demonstrated by Karl Polanyi, neither nature nor labour, neither money nor culture (he does not mention the latter) must be dominated by the markets, or become a commodity (Polanyi 2001: 259 f.). Providing basic public services and ensuring that the social conditions of production and reproduction be publicly controlled according to democratic principles form the communist basis of a real liberal democracy guaranteeing that individuals can act as individual owners and freely make their own life choices, and have right to contract as equally free citizens. These foundations pave the way for a plurality of forms of property, modes of production and ways of life that face a double criterion: expressing the individual’s free development and proving to be a contribution to free development that is recognized according to the individual’s respective performance. This is to be achieved by a double transformation within and far beyond capitalism (Klein 2013).

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