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Review

# The Living Flame

- Reviews section -

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*The Living Flame - the revolutionary passion of Rosa Luxemburg* by Paul Le Blanc, Haymarket 2019.

Paul Le Blanc's book is a very readable starter for anybody who wants to get to know Rosa Luxemburg and her contribution to revolutionary theory and practice. It is a pick and mix collection of essays written over the last twenty years ranging from clarifying the debate between Lenin and Luxemburg on inner party democracy to imaginative reflections on Luxemburg's relationship to her cat, Mimi and the natural world. You can dip in and out. The essays point you to Rosa Luxemburg's texts or to other writers' commentaries on her. Inevitably there is some repetition in such a collection so if you are looking for more detailed and thoroughgoing analysis you would need to look at Le Blanc's other writings.

New generations of activists are getting involved in left wing and progressive political action but may be unfamiliar with the classical Marxist tradition of the early twentieth century. This book provides an excellent bridge. A strength of the US Marxist tradition is the clarity of exposition you find there compared to some European intellectuals. The author definitely falls into the former camp.

Born in Poland a year after the Paris Commune in 1871, Rosa Luxemburg was active in the Polish, Russian and German theatres of the revolutionary movement and lived in Warsaw, Zurich, Paris and Berlin. Along with Lenin, Trotsky and a small minority in the German Social Democratic Party, she stood against the inter-imperialist slaughter of the First World War. That led to her imprisonment for two years.

Released, she and other comrades like Karl Liebknecht and Clara Zetkin endeavoured to work in full support of the Russian Revolution and to build a revolutionary left wing, the Spartacist League which opposed Bernstein's and Kautsky's social democrats who were now the government of the Weimar Republic. Although she thought it ill-advised, the Spartacist League launched a disastrous armed uprising.

The Social Democrats allowed her to be handed over to the Freikorps (harbingers of the Nazis) who brutally murdered her and her co-leader, Liebknecht. Her body was thrown into the canal that runs through Berlin. She was 48 years old.

The official communist movement, once Stalinised, wrote her out of history as it contentiously exaggerated her differences with Lenin. With the rise of the anti-Stalinist left from the latter part of the 1950s, her life and work has become much better known.

## Why is she relevant today?

I think there are four key reasons which Le Blanc outlines throughout this book.

### **Overcoming the dilemma between reform and revolution**

Bernstein was an important figure within the German and international socialist movement (he had even been named by Frederick Engels as Karl Marx's literary executor). Bernstein came out as an open supporter of reformism. His

argument, which has been echoed by reformist politicians and thinkers many times since, was that capitalism was overcoming its tendency towards crisis, and blunting rather than sharpening the antagonism between workers and capitalists. This created a framework in which the socialist movement should push for piecemeal reform as a strategy and counterposed to the revolutionary overthrow of the system. Rosa Luxemburg at 28 published the pamphlet *Reform or Revolution* in 1899 which took up all of Bernstein's arguments.

This is very relevant to socialists working inside the Labour Party today. In normal times the LP leadership thinks broadly along Bernstein's line. Corbynism disrupted this to some degree but today Starmer's continual repetition of the national interest and national consensus and seeking constructive engagement echo much of the Bernstein position.

Luxemburg exposes the idealism, the lack of connection to material exploitation, class struggle and capitalist crisis of this approach:

"The theory of basing socialism on the moral notion of justice, on a struggle against the mode of distribution, of class antagonism as an antagonism between the poor and the rich, the effort to graft the "cooperative principle" on to capitalist economy all the nice notions found in Bernstein's doctrine." (*Reform or Revolution* [Marxist internet archive.](#))

This is resonant of much of the ideology coming from the strongly Fabian influenced shadow cabinet. Luxemburg gives us the alternative:

"The peculiar character of this movement resides precisely in the fact that here, for the first time in history, the popular masses themselves, in opposition to the ruling classes, are to impose their will. The masses can only form this will in a constant struggle against the existing order. The union of the broad popular masses with an aim reaching beyond the existing social order, the union of the daily struggle with the great world transformation, that is the task of the social democratic movement, which must logically grope on its road of development between the following two reefs: abandoning the mass character of the party or abandoning its final aim, falling into sectarianism or bourgeois reformism, anarchism or opportunism." (*Reform or Revolution*, op cit)

She argues against a sect like approach standing aloof from everyday struggles and only making propaganda or conversely just burrowing away inside a mass party like Labour hoping for another resurgence of the left which will capture the party.

### **A feminist and a mensch**

Rosa did not particularly address the feminist question in the ways that other women leaders like Kollontai did, she did not want to become the marginalised spokesperson on women (p. 19). But she did have an understanding of the relationship between women's liberation and working-class emancipation. This is what she wrote in 1902:

"with the political emancipation of women a strong fresh wind must also blow into [the socialist movement's] political and spiritual life, dispelling the suffocating atmosphere of the present philistine family life which so unmistakably rubs off on our party members too, the workers as well as the leaders." (p. 19)

She was never dependent on a man and she broke with her great love, Leo Jogiches, after he admitted to another affair, but maintained a working political relationship with him. The film by Marguerite Von Trotta, *Red Rosa*, shows these relationships quite well. She had several lovers, including a younger man, the son of Clara Zetkin. At the time this would have been seen as a bit shocking including inside the Social Democratic hierarchy.

It is clear as a strong woman inside a largely male leadership of the biggest workers party in the world, she had to be strong. As Le Blanc suggests she perhaps benefited from her outsider status to put her finger on the rampant reformism destroying it as a class struggle force.

Le Blanc's book really captures the enthusiasm and commitment of Luxemburg through all the ups and downs of her life. Her socialism was not some abstract theory where you could sit at the top of a formidable apparatus of trade unions and millions of members that would usher in socialism as capitalism collapsed through its own contradictions. Unlike Bernstein, Bebel and the SPD leadership she knew that capitalist power would not be defeated without mass struggle in action, outside of parliament and she also was very aware that failure would lead to barbarism. The result of the SPD capitulation in voting war credits to defend the German nation in August 1914 was the barbarism of the Great War and this choice of Socialism or Barbarism coined by Luxemburg remains the case even more so today with the danger of planetary destruction.

Being a socialist for her was not some austere, sacrificial grind but the embrace of the best of life itself:

"Being a mensch [a person] is the main thing! And that means to be firm, ludic and cheerful. Yes, cheerful despite everything and anything - since whining is the business of the weak. Being a Mensch means happily throwing one's life 'on fate's great scale' if necessary, but, at the same time, enjoying every bright day and every beautiful cloud." (p. 27)

### **An open theory of imperialism**

Paul Le Blanc identifies three aspects of Luxemburg's magnum opus, *The Accumulation of Capital*, that are particularly relevant to today's socialists (p. 102-3):

– to keep capitalism going, capitalists must expand into "non-capitalist" areas, geographical areas currently outside the capitalist economic sphere

– imperialism is not restricted to the 'highest stage' of capitalism (as Lenin argued) but is something that one finds at the earliest beginnings of capitalism (...) and which continues non-stop(...) down to the present

– her anthropological sensitivity to the impact of capitalist expansion on the rich variety of the world's peoples and cultures. "The unbridled greed... is incapable of seeing far enough to recognise the value of the economic monuments of an older civilisation."

This continual expansion can be interpreted as the invasion of all territories "including the territories of our bodies, our family life, our friendships, our creative drives, our sexuality, our dreams and multiple community and social and cultural activities (...) reflected in voracious drives for 'privatisation' as well as in rampant consumerism ."

Living with Big Tech today feels a lot like this. Life during lockdown in the present crisis has made some people reflect on their lives and the models of consumption constraining us. Even where working class struggle has historically constructed non-capitalist commons such as the National Health Service or local services, capital inexorably aims to expand into these territories to sustain the rate of profit.

Her concern for pre-modern forms of society echo the positions of eco-socialists working with indigenous peoples who see some of the communitarian forms in places like Peru to some extent as pre-figurative forms of how socialism would relate to mother earth (cf. the work of Hugo Blanco).

### Why democracy and socialism cannot be separated

Perhaps the biggest consequence of the Stalinist counterrevolution in Russia has been the way that working people in the developed countries of the West have identified socialism with a total lack of real democracy. As Le Blanc explains some Cold War warriors have tried to recruit Luxemburg to the cause of anti-communism on the basis of her take on the big polemic in the 1904 Russian Social Democratic party congress which led to the split between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks and the critical remarks she made about post-revolutionary Russia.

He explains that Luxemburg always remained a supporter of the idea of a revolutionary vanguard party and defended the Russian revolution. Her final struggle was all about not just seeking victory for German workers but providing the vital breakthrough in the West that could provide a lifeline for the Russian revolution. She was no supporter of the idea of socialism in one country.

Readers interested in the dispute about inner party democracy in 1904 should get hold of chapter 4 of this book that does a fine job in clarifying the real debate between Rosa and Lenin.

On the critique of the Russian comrades banning of parties and factions in post-revolutionary Russia then Luxemburg is much more prescient and generally right. It is worth reading the crucial quote:

"Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. Public life gradually falls asleep, a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule (...) an elite of the working class is invited from time to time to meetings where they are to applaud the speeches of the leaders and to approve proposed resolutions unanimously" (P62)

As a description of what actually happened in all the transitional non-capitalist societies this is pretty accurate.

She also understands the historical materialist reason for the importance of revolutionary democracy.

"Unlike the bourgeois revolution which did not need the political training and education of the entire mass of the people (...) for the proletarian dictatorship that is the life element (...) Socialism in life demands a complete spiritual transformation (...) the only way to a rebirth is the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion"

Part of her legacy is she spoke up - like Trotsky later on - for a different version of socialism to the false one of Stalinism. It would be harder today to convince people of socialism if the only historical record was of people who said the Stalinist way was the only one possible.

## A lover of birds (and her cat Mimi)

John Berger wrote a beautiful few pages entitled "A Gift for Rosa Luxemburg" (in *Landscapes* Verso 2016 page 87 ff) which focuses on Rosa's love of the natural world and in particular of the birds she heard when in prison. This is from a letter she wrote quoted by Berger:

"The one who has done most to restore me to reason is a small friend whose image I am sending enclosed. This

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comrade with the jauntily held beak, steeply rising forehead and eye of a know-it-all is called... the arbour bird or the garden mocker. This bird is quite an oddball. He doesn't sing just one song or one melody like other birds, but he is a public speaker by the grace of God, he holds forth, making his speeches to the garden, and does so with a very loud voice full of dramatic excitement, leaping transitions and passages of heightened pathos."

We are listening to the birds in the silence of our lockdown with memories of your struggle.

Source [Socialist Resistance](#).

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