

# “THE MARXISM OF ROSA LUXEMBURG”

The unity of the concrete totality and historical reality

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During the First World War, György Lukács began to study Hegel more intensively, as he reminds us in 1967 in the “Preface to the New Edition” of *History and Class Consciousness*. Although Hegel’s effect on him “was highly ambiguous”, Lukács “strove to go beyond bourgeois radicalism” and felt repelled by social democratic theory, especially Karl Kautsky’s version of it (Lukács 1971 [1923]: ix–x). At the same time, Lukács became acquainted with the work of Rosa Luxemburg, whose theory, and even more so her Marxist methodological leanings were to become very important for the theories he developed during the war and in the first post-war years.

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Rosa Luxemburg is one of those authors who is often invoked under the most diverse circumstances. The same goes for the fact that she inspired many political organisations, while no major movement has ever been defined by her theoretical perspective (Hudis 2019: ix). When she is written about, a myth is often created around her personality based on some random episodes from her private and public life (cf. Le Blanc 2019). Moreover, a particular reading of her ideas and theories is often rendered in a personal tone. But this was not the case with Lukács’s approach to Luxemburg. So why is Luxemburg’s Marxism important to him? Let us try to give an answer to this question.

## **1. Luxemburg’s social philosophy**

Even though Rosa Luxemburg did not write a study that we can identify as a philosophical work in the usual academic sense, nor did she leave us any “philosophical notebooks”, she was more interested in philosophical and methodological questions than we might expect. She develops her social philosophy and Marxist theory, on the one hand, in critique of Smithian-Ricardian political economy and, on the other, in critique of her contemporary bourgeois philosophers and social and political thinkers such as the Kantians and neo-Kantians in the social

democratic movement (Göçmen 2007: 376).<sup>1</sup> What these two groups have in common is that they approach the question of society and political economy with a belief in the capitalist mode of production as the human norm and are not interested in the scientific explanation of the inner connections of apparently isolated phenomena; in other words, they are not interested in totality. For this reason, Luxemburg writes the following in her essay “Back to Adam Smith!”:

Schüller’s<sup>2</sup> exhortation [...] to return to the method of classical economics is interesting moreover as a fragment of that general ‘return’ that seems to be the watchword of bourgeois social science. Back to Kant in philosophy, back to Adam Smith in economics! A convulsive reaching backward toward already superseded positions that is a reliable sign of hopelessness into which the bourgeoisie has strayed, intellectually as well as socially (Luxemburg 2013 [1894/95]: 87–88).

The call to go “back to Kant” was raised by a number of German philosophers in the 1860s as part of an effort to combat the legacy of Hegel’s dialectics, and eventually led to the German neo-Kantian revival. What Luxemburg is trying to achieve in the debates with various social-democratic theorists is, in that regard, a reformulation of the fundamental methodological questions of social and political theory, defending the achievements of Hegelian and Marxian philosophy.<sup>3</sup> She follows Marx’s insights into the historical analysis of value relations and his

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1 To demonstrate some of Luxemburg’s philosophical, or more precisely Hegelian, standpoints in my essay, I will base some of my arguments on Doğan Göçmen’s (2007) analysis.

2 Richard Schüller was a bourgeois economist associated with the neo-classical Austrian School of economics.

metaphysical deduction of the classicists into their opposite, i.e., into the dialectical (Luxemburg 2013 [1894/95]: 87).

The philosophical debates of her time, which were of interest only to professional philosophers, could not escape her attention, directed towards grasping the totality with all its complexities, inner relationships and contradictions. She participated in these methodological debates with numerous works from a Hegelian-Marxist perspective.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in her essay “Empty Nuts” (*Hohle Nüsse*) she writes:

“Since, from the time of Hegel, philosophical roads have led just unavoidably to the highly dangerous robber caves of Feuerbach and Marx, bourgeois philosophers had no choice but to eradicate Hegel from the history of philosophy, simply by fiat, and let science jump back ‘to Kant’ by a magic gesture” (Luxemburg 1990 [1899]: 490, my trans.).

In a sense, Luxemburg’s work offers a vivid description of the philosophical debates on methodological and theoretical questions towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Against the epistemological scepticism of the bourgeoisie and the eclecticism and poverty of theory that shimmers in all colours, Luxemburg formulates the concept of contradiction in almost all her writings, but even more explicitly in her

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3 To prepare her fundamental critique of the neo-Kantians, Luxemburg seems to have studied Kant and Hegel through primary and secondary sources. Her secondary sources include the works of Plekhanov, Mehring and Lenin. As for primary sources in Luxemburg’s philosophical work, we find references to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and to Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (cf. Göçmen 2007: 378, n. 8).

4 See Luxemburg’s account of Kant’s *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Luxemburg 2015 [1915]: 366–367).

*Introduction to Political Economy* and *The Accumulation of Capital: A Contribution to an Economic Explanation of Imperialism* (Luxemburg 2015: 382–383). And it is precisely from these premises that Lukács will begin his journey with Rosa Luxemburg’s Marxism.

## 2. Lukács’s Luxemburg

In her famous pamphlet *Social Reform or Revolution?* Luxemburg shows how Eduard Bernstein replaces dialectics with a mechanical approach and thus develops an evolutionary moral theory that neglects the history of class struggles.<sup>5</sup> She accuses Bernstein of detaching the programme of the socialist movement from its material basis and trying to put it on an idealist footing. Many of Luxemburg’s conclusions, like these from her debate with neo-Kantians like Bernstein and Kautsky, are unsurprisingly echoed in Lukács’s critique of social democratic theory and its “economic fatalism”. He claims, for example, that “the revival of Hegel’s dialectics struck a hard blow at the revisionist tradition” and that already “Bernstein had wished to eliminate everything reminiscent of Hegel’s dialectics in the name of ‘science’” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: xxi). And nothing was further from the minds of his philosophical opponents, as he believed, especially Kautsky, than the desire to take over the defence of this tradition.

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5 See Luxemburg 2020 [1899], especially chapter 4.

No wonder Lukács saw Rosa Luxemburg as an ally. He treated her ideas as a coherent whole with universal application. In fact, with the twenty pages he devoted to Luxemburg in the 1921 essay, Luxemburg’s theory appeared for the first time in Marxist philosophy as a system. Only a few years after the publication of *The Accumulation of Capital*, on Christmas Eve 1922, he wrote the following in his preface to *History and Class Consciousness*:

A few words of explanation – superfluous for many readers perhaps – are due for the prominence given in these pages to the presentation, interpretation and discussion of the theories of Rosa Luxemburg. On this point I would say, firstly, that Rosa Luxemburg, alone among Marx’s disciples, has made a real advance on his life’s work in both the content and method of his economic doctrines. She alone has found a way to apply them concretely to the present state of social development (Lukács 1971 [1923]: xli).

In Luxemburg’s studies, Lukács argues, we find the fundamental problems of capitalism analysed in the context of the historical process as a totality. In a rather gothic style, he highlights: “[I]n her work we see how the last flowering of capitalism is transformed into a ghastly dance of death, into the inexorable march of Oedipus to his doom” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 32–33).

While outlining the crucial difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, Lukács dwells on the point of view of totality. As he explains, this all-encompassing domination of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method that Marx took from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the founda-

tions of an entirely new science. Lukács emphasises that the primacy of the category of the totality is the bearer of the principle of revolution in science, and argues forcefully that after decades of vulgarised Marxism, it was Luxemburg’s magnum opus *The Accumulation of Capital* that took up the problem at precisely this point (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 29). He goes on to argue, echoing Luxemburg’s critique of Bernstein, that the trivialisation of Marxism and its deflection into a bourgeois “science” was first, most clearly and openly expressed in Bernstein’s *The Preconditions of Socialism* (1899).

Lukács emphasises that it is not enough to be politically committed for or against capitalism. One has to commit oneself theoretically well. One has to decide to look at the whole history of society from the Marxist point of view, i.e. as a totality, and thus to confront the phenomenon of imperialism – i.e. accumulation – in theory and practice (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 30). Since Bernstein and his “epigones” eventually found themselves in a capitalist society “in general” – and whose existence seemed to them to correspond to the nature of human reason and the “laws of nature” –, they easily found themselves close to Ricardo and his successors, the bourgeois vulgar economists (Ibid.).

On the eve of the First World War, after some fifteen years of preparation, Rosa Luxemburg published *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), her most comprehensive theoretical work and one of the most important and original classic works of Marxist economics (to which Lukács will refer in his essay on Luxemburg’s Marxism). In short, in *The Accumulation of Capital*, Rosa Luxemburg sought a way to scientifically investigate and

explain the conditions of capitalist monopolisation, extended reproduction and imperialism by taking into account the dynamic relationship between capitalist and non-capitalist spatiality (cf. Čakardić 2017). Luxemburg believed that Marx had neglected the spatial determination of capital, focusing in his critique of capital exclusively on “time”, i.e. on the temporal dimension of the internal dynamics of capitalist reproduction. In contrast, Luxemburg “tried to show that the inner core of capital consists of the urge to consume what is external to it – non-capitalist strata” (Hudis 2014). Luxemburg’s aim was to formulate her own theory of extended reproduction and critique of classical economics, which contained not only a temporal but also a “spatial analytical dimension”.

Both friends and foes sharply criticised Luxemburg for pointing out Marx’s “glaring inconsistencies” and, as she put it, the “defects” of his approach to the problem of accumulation and expanded reproduction from the second volume of *Capital* (Čakardić 2017: 39). In a letter to Franz Mehring, referring to critiques of her book *The Accumulation of Capital*, she wrote:

“In general, I was well aware that the book would run into resistance in the short term; unfortunately, our prevailing ‘Marxism’, like some gout ridden old uncle, is afraid of any fresh breeze of thought, and I took it into account that I would have to do a lot of fighting at first” (Luxemburg cited in Adler, Hudis, Laschitzka 2011: 324).

But the problem with the attack on Luxemburg’s accumulation theory meant something else, as Lukács pointed out. The debate as conducted by Bauer, Eckstein and others did not turn “[...] on the truth or falsity of the solution Rosa Luxemburg pro-



posed to the problem of the accumulation of capital. On the contrary, discussion centred on whether there was a real problem at all” (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 30). Lukács continues: “Seen from the standpoint of vulgar economics this is quite understandable, and even inevitable. For if the accumulation of capital is treated as an isolated problem in economics and from the point of view of the individual capitalist, it is easy to argue that no real problem exists” (ibid.).

Rosa Luxemburg devoted an entire pamphlet – published posthumously and entitled “An Anti-Critique: The Accumulation of Capital, or What the Epigones Have Made of Marx’s Theory” – to providing a response to all the criticisms directed against her and her book, and exclusively to refuting “Marxist” vulgar economics. Lukács, following in Luxemburg’s footsteps, also writes about “Hegelian epigones”. For the absolute idealism of “Hegel’s epigones” implies the dissolution of the original system; it implies the separation of the dialectic from the living material of history and this ultimately means the disruption of the dialectical unity of thought and existence. Lukács writes:

In the dogmatic materialism of Marx’s epigones we find a repetition of the process dissolving the concrete totality of historical reality. And even if their method does not degenerate into the empty abstract schemata of Hegel’s disciples, it does harden into a vulgar economics and a mechanical preoccupation with specialised sciences. If the purely ideological constructions of the Hegelians have proved unequal to the task of understanding historical events, the Marxists have revealed a comparable inability to understand either the connections between the so-called ‘ideological’ forms of society

and their economic base or the economy itself as a totality and as a social reality (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 34).

When he had finished enumerating the distorted readings of Marx, while discussing the problem of returning to the abstract ethical imperatives of the Kantian school, Lukács claimed, almost epigrammatically, that the two fundamental studies that inaugurate the theoretical rebirth of Marxism are Rosa Luxemburg’s *The Accumulation of Capital* and Lenin’s *State and Revolution* (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 35). But if we go a step further, we could argue that this also includes the possible interpretation that Luxemburg’s philosophical and at the same time political struggle with the Social Democrats heralds not only the theoretical rebirth of Marxism, but also of Hegelian dialectics. After all, as Luxemburg (cited in Göçmen 2007: 380) points out in her essay “Aus dem Nachlaß unserer Meister” (“From the legacy of our masters”), it was exactly “the cutting weapon of Hegelian dialectics” that enabled Marx to make such a splendid critical butchery.

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