

# **“CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS ON ROSA LUXEMBURG’S *CRITIQUE OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION*”:**

Swept by the tide of revolution

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In this essay of *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács (1971 [1923]: 262) criticized Rosa Luxemburg for “striking a blow at the theoretical basis of Bolshevik organization and tactics”. Lukács argues that Luxemburg’s beliefs stem from an overestimation of the organic character of the course of history and that she was overly dismissive of the central role of organisation as the guarantor of the spirit of revolution in the workers’ movement. As Lukács writes in *HCC*: “She maintains the opposite view that real revolutionary spirit is to be sought and found exclusively in the elemental spontaneity of the masses” (ibid.: 284). In the essay, Lukács appears to follow Lenin’s rejection of the notion that attributed higher importance to the spontaneity

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of the workers in their reaction to social and economic deprivation, thus minimizing the significance of the “conscious revolutionary.” There is, however, a tension between an emphasis on consciousness and spontaneity in *HCC*.

Without delving into Lukács’s full polemic against Rosa Luxemburg, I would like to focus on a specific element of this debate: *the idea of spontaneity*. It is certainly a challenging task to discuss this in the framework of Lukács’s essay after one century, because many scholars and comrades would counter that the debate itself may no longer be timely. On the other hand, I believe the category of spontaneity might still be relevant in light of the global unrest over austerity, rising far-right movements, cost-of-living crisis, and more. Spontaneity is still a fascinating political and philosophical concept, especially in the context of democracy and self-organizing. Many Marxist and anarchist scholars tend to reject the concept of spontaneity way too quickly, arguing that it is a short-lived phenomenon that cannot actually lead to meaningful political transformation. The notion of spontaneity and popular consciousness was central for Rosa Luxemburg and I believe it still holds great potential towards the aim of a socialist transformation of capitalist society.

Firstly, in political theory and discourse, spontaneity is defined as impulsive and short-lived reactions to a particular situation that are most often unplanned and lack direction from a central committee or organization. We can cite recent spontaneous events, for instance, the Black Lives Matter uprising following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 or the unrest in

Paris over the neoliberal pension reform in mid-2023. Spontaneous actions emerge, most commonly, as a response to injustice and oppression. In the contemporary context, spontaneity represents one of the few channels which retain the capacity to produce change and it comes from a place of discontent with institutions and unmet popular demands. This being said, organization and party leadership is still highly important to implement lasting political change. This is where Lukács's critique of Rosa Luxemburg can come to bear. In her 2016 work *Crowds and Party*, Jodi Dean argues against the transformative potential of spontaneous movements. Dean (2016) states that while spontaneous crowd events are full of political potential because they ignite a sense of belonging, parties and political organizations are still necessary for organized, sustained struggle. Yet, are slow organizational work and rapid revolutions in contradiction? Rosa Luxemburg proved that precisely such short-lived movements can help us gain confidence in the possibility of radical transformation.

### ***Rosa Luxemburg on spontaneity***

In the essay in question, Lukács emerges as a fervent critic of spontaneity theory and Rosa Luxemburg's account of Bolshevik policies. For many comrades, Luxemburg is still a sort of social democrat who opposed Bolshevism for various reasons, but this is not accurate. Here, it is important to cite Adolf Warski (1922), who attempted to clarify Luxemburg's stance on

the matter through theoretical reasoning and relied heavily on Luxemburg’s own reports, letters, articles, and other writings to debunk some popular myths among revolutionary Marxists. Warski was a member of the communist movement and from 1918 on an active in the Communist Party of Poland. His defence of Luxemburg’s stance could also be read through critical lenses, because in it she appears as almost sympathetic to Bolshevism and could even call herself a Bolshevik. This was not the case, however, and both Warski and Luxemburg were critical of the bolshevization of the communist parties and movements throughout Europe.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that, for Rosa Luxemburg, spontaneity is not merely an impulsive action that has no need for party organization. For her, spontaneous initiatives carry a more significant socio-political impact. Such popular initiatives are an element to be found, for example, in the 1905 Russian mass strikes that, according to Luxemburg, happened undesignedly. The struggle for socialism and revolutionary transformation depends, for Luxemburg, both on spontaneous initiatives and the class consciousness sustained by political organizations. As part of a wider class struggle, spontaneous initiatives include various revolutionary activities like protests on specific issues, mass strikes, agitation, and more. Thus, for Luxemburg spon-

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1 In his book, Warski was rather critical of Paul Levi’s intentions of publishing Luxemburg’s pamphlet written in prison. Warski argued that Levi presented her words as an ultimate proof of her opposition to Bolshevism instead of an intellectual contemplation of sorts while in prison. This might also be the reason why Lukács expressed such frustration with the text itself and Levi’s intentions.

taneity makes little sense without the wider economic and social totality. As she explains in her 1906 work, *The Mass Strike*:

The revolution, even when the proletariat, with the social democrats at their head, appear in the leading role, is not a manoeuvre of the proletariat in the open field, but a fight in the midst of the incessant crashing, displacing and crumbling of the social foundation. In short, in the mass strikes in Russia the element of spontaneity plays such a predominant part, not because the Russian proletariat are ‘uneducated’, but because revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them (Luxemburg 2008 [1906]: 148).

In short, for Luxemburg, the element of spontaneity captures the undirected action when the oppressed and exploited realize the totality of their social and economic conditions. Spontaneity has a democratic and popular dimension, but it is in no way a form of unruly politics.

## **Lukács new look on the question of spontaneity**

In this chapter of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács appears to be extremely critical of the notion of spontaneity and Luxemburg’s account of it. He writes:

In so far as the proletariat’s reactions to the crisis proceed according to the ‘laws’ of the capitalist economy, in so far as they limit themselves at most to spontaneous mass actions, they exhibit a structure that is in many ways like that of movements of pre-revolutionary ages. They break out spontaneously almost without exception as a defence against an economic and more

rarely, a political thrust by the bourgeoisie, against the attempts of the latter to find a ‘purely economic’ solution to the crisis. (The spontaneity of a movement, we note, is only the subjective, mass-psychological expression of its determination by pure economic laws.) However, such outbreaks come to a halt no less spontaneously, they peter out when their immediate goals are achieved or seem unattainable. It appears, therefore, as if they have run their ‘natural’ course (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 306–7).

Lenin recognized two types of ideologies: the revolutionary and the bureaucratic, the latter embodying a form of opportunism. For Lukács, spontaneity represents, in fact, a sort of bureaucratization. Lukács believed that spontaneity can only be a form of *immediate* action, and as such it cannot but remain confined to the surface of reality, without penetrating its deeper layers. According to both Lenin and Lukács, this was a major ideological aim of imperialism: merely scratching the surface of reality at the expense of a deeper undertaking, especially in the context of the labor movement. Lukács was dismissive of spontaneity theory because he believed that the authentic emancipation of the proletariat depends on the acquisition of its proper consciousness and the role of the revolutionary tribune or agitator is to bring this consciousness to life. In his article written in 1921, “Spontaneity of the Masses, Activity of the Party”, many parts of which are included in the “Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organisation” chapter of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács further develops his arguments against Luxemburg and highlights the limitations of revolutionary spontaneity. Here, Lukács also argued that the party plays a key

role in transforming spontaneity into consciousness, and that achieving that goal is a tactical question. Nevertheless, Lukács questioned the entire logic of spontaneity based on his observations on previous revolutionary activities in Europe, arguing that it is crucial to cure the proletariat of the delusion that it is possible to spontaneously follow the path of the revolution. Lukács saw this issue as a sign of the ideological crisis of the proletariat that needs to be resolved with praxis.

Hungarian scholar and former researcher of the Lukács Archives in Budapest, Miklós Mesterházi released a book in 1987 with the title “The Historical Philosopher of Messianism: György Lukács’s Work in the 1920s” (in Hungarian), where he dedicates an entire chapter to Lukács’s stance against the theory of spontaneity. Mesterházi (1987) highlights Lukács’s criticism of the aspect of fatalism present in spontaneity theory and argues that this criticism might stem from his experience with the Hungarian Revolution, which he defined as “party anger”. Mesterházi believes that this played a more significant role in Lukács’s criticism of spontaneity than his theoretical biases. Lukács’s ultimate reason against the theory of spontaneity is that he believed that it is based in the assumption that the revolution could only be triggered by the collapse of the capitalist system. The history of the Russian revolution, however, is proof of the opposite; moreover, spontaneity theory would end up forcing the proletariat into helplessness were this collapse not to happen. Lukács rejects this fatalism because he defines the revolution as a free act that can precisely break with the “natural laws” of capital-

ism. This is not merely a theoretical construction, but rather the lesson of the October Revolution.

Lukács firmly believed that the fate of the revolution is in our hands, and I believe Luxemburg herself did not reject this idea and that her spontaneity theory is much more than that. It is important for us to understand that Lukács’s criticism of Luxemburg is situated in a very delicate context and in extremely turbulent times. While this criticism of Luxemburg might spark many doubts, it can also be read as an authentic self-criticism for Lukács. As Warski (1922) writes: “In calm times, one can walk around with worn-out notions – in the tide of the revolution however, one gets swept away along with all doubts”.

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