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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, eds. _The Rosa Luxemburg Reader_. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004. 447 pp. Introduction, endnotes, index. \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 1-58367-103-X.

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Rosa Luxemburg's Tasks

Rosa Luxemburg composed her last essay, "Order Reigns in Berlin," in hiding after the failed Spartacus uprising of 1919. In it she wrote: "The revolution has no time to lose, it storms onward--past still open graves, past 'victories' and 'defeats'--toward its great goals. To follow lucidly its principles and its paths is the first task of the fighters for international socialism" (p. 374). The texts gathered in _The Rosa Luxemburg Reader_ show precisely the exemplary way in which Luxemburg fulfilled her own council. Analyzing, theorizing, and participating in the "principles and paths" of revolutionary Social Democracy was Luxemburg's life work.

Born in Russian-occupied Poland in 1871, Rosa Luxemburg was one of the most important activists and theorists of the socialist movement in Eastern and Central Europe until she was murdered in 1919 by right-wing Freikorps. For those familiar with Luxemburg primarily through _Social Reform or Revolution_, her critique of the reform socialist Eduard Bernstein, the _Rosa Luxemburg Reader_ is a welcome addition to the literature. In it editors Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson have collected writings that represent Luxemburg's major works and her thinking on such diverse topics as primitive communism, imperialism, revolutionary practice, women's suffrage, the Russian Revolutions, and World War I--some appearing in English for the first time. Within each of the book's five sections individual writings are introduced with a short editorial note that includes the original publication date (or delivery, if a speech), translator, and a brief synopsis of the work's content and the context of its production. Translations are taken from previous English publications of the material where possible; new translations are primarily provided by Anderson and Ashley Passmore.

The twenty-three page introduction gives a useful overview of Luxemburg's life and work by sketching out the historical background, reception, and the key arguments of her major works. In their discussion of the volume's contents, Hudis and Anderson highlight the significance of Luxemburg's theories and political stances, some of which they argue have been overlooked or misinterpreted by previous scholars. Above all, Hudis and Anderson aim to demonstrate Luxemburg's continued relevance for contemporary activists and thinkers in the age of global capital (p. 7-8). The editors argue that Luxemburg was ahead of her time in recognizing the links between capitalism, imperialism, and "permanent war," a critique that "continues to resonate" (pp. 20, 30). Hudis and Anderson have chosen selections well to make their argument. In the nearly 400 pages of Luxemburg's writings gathered here, one is continually impressed by the critical and passionate spirit with which she approaches issues ranging from parliamentary politics to mass strikes to the plight of colonized peoples. Particularly striking is the prescience of her analysis, and how germane it is to issues in our own time.

The most significant section of part one is the excerpts from Luxemburg's major work *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), where she argues that Marx failed to consider fully the inevitable expansion of capitalist reproduction to non-capitalist societies. As the editors point out in an endnote, English versions of the text have routinely omitted Luxemburg's original subtitle: "A Contribution to an Explanation of Imperialism" (p. 398). Selections from the book are well-chosen to demonstrate the originality and continued relevance of Luxemburg's analysis, namely that capitalism is compelled to find new markets outside the industrialized world, and that imperialism and the violent exploitation of colonized peoples go hand in hand with capitalist expansion. Luxemburg makes an explicit comparison between the dispossession of medieval European peasants and the destructive power of "modern colonial policy" (p. 63). As it did in Europe, capitalism destroys traditional "social units" and "economic ties," through the "only solution" available to it: force (p.64). Also included are selections from Luxemburg's unfinished *Introduction to Political Economy*, where she discusses primitive communism, and "Slavery," a recently discovered text published here for the first time in English. This section concludes with an impassioned newspaper article written shortly after the destructive volcanic eruption in the French colony of Martinique. Luxemburg pulls no punches in exposing the hypocrisy of European nations who rush to help victims of natural disasters who have already suffered the disaster of colonialism at the hands of their would-be saviors. Interestingly she includes the suppression of uprisings in Poland and France in this critique, essentially equating the proletariat with the colonized. A short piece like this is an instructive contrast to Luxemburg's more technical writings and might also serve as a valuable teaching text.

The second section, on the "politics of revolution," includes selections from the published works *Social Reform or Revolution* (1889) and *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions* (1906), as well as short speeches and articles. *Reform or Revolution* is Luxemburg's spirited critique of Eduard Bernstein, and arguably her most familiar work. Bernstein called for a reappraisal of Marx's theories, and further argued that the strength of workers' unions meant that the proletariat could eventually achieve its goals through parliamentary means. For Luxemburg, the question "reform or revolution" concerned "the very existence of the Social Democratic movement" (p. 129, emphasis in the original). Defending Marx, Luxemburg argues that reforms pursued for their own ends through bourgeois parliamentarism are merely "surface modifications" that can never substitute for the revolutionary transformation of the social order (p.157). In her writings on mass strikes and other forms of political action, Luxemburg again takes on the more conservative elements of Social Democracy, many of which considered revolutionary action in Russia premature.

Part II also includes pieces collected under the title "writings on women." Luxemburg's critical stance towards bourgeois feminism is well known but has often been interpreted as indifference, or even enmity, towards feminist goals. One of the strengths of this volume is the measures that Hudis and Anderson take to correct this perception. The editors include four short pieces here, only one of which has previously been published in English. In "A Tactical Question," Luxemburg blasts the Belgian Social Democrats for dropping woman's suffrage from their platform in order to form a parliamentary coalition with the Liberals. The 1912 speech "Women's Suffrage and Class Struggle" demonstrates how essential Luxemburg considered the political enfranchisement of proletarian women to the goals of socialism. Luxemburg places women's emancipation in the context of revolutionary socialism, and is utterly dismissive of collaboration with bourgeois women who she calls "parasites of the parasites of the social body" (p. 240). Her attitude here does not constitute hostility to feminism; rather, it is reflective of her refusal to endanger the goals of Social Democracy through cooperation with the liberal bourgeoisie. Democracy for Luxemburg meant that

all voices must be heard and she saw the empowerment of women's voices as a necessary catalyst for revolution. In their introduction the editors address the important question of how Luxemburg earned a reputation for indifference to the "woman question" (p. 20-21). Is it that her contemporaries and her historians expected from her a more overt engagement with feminism because she was a woman? Luxemburg herself consciously avoided such connections. As the Marxist and feminist scholar Raya Dunayevskaya writes, "Luxemburg rightly refused to be pigeonholed by the German Social Democracy into the so-called Woman Question, as if that were the only place she 'belonged.'" [1]

The selections in Part II from "Theory and Practice," Luxemburg's 1910 response to Karl Kautsky (who had refused to publish an essay of hers on the mass strike) deserves mention here because of a rather problematic endnote included by the editors. Luxemburg refers to "Trotha's victory over the Hottentot women and children in the Kalahari" (p. 219). The endnote connected to this sentence mistakenly places the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples of German Southwest Africa (present day Namibia) in the "early nineteenth century" (pp. 417-418). Secondly, the endnote establishes a direct link between the Herero and Nama genocide and the Holocaust. Such a statement demands more evidence and contextualization than the editors give, and indeed than the format of an endnote allows. While several historians have compared these two events, Hudis and Anderson do not cite any of these studies, or indicate that the issue remains controversial. [2] As it stands, their note makes a highly provocative but unsupported statement. This endnote, like the others, provides useful historical context, but in this particular case is simply inappropriate, especially considering that the Reader is intended for a general audience.

The third section covers Luxemburg's analysis of Russian Social Democracy, including excerpts from the unfinished The Russian Revolution (1918). What stands out here is Luxemburg's insistence that revolutionary action cannot conform to any pre-determined plan or formula, and that socialism is not a movement of politicians, but of the working class (pp. 230, 253). In her critique of Lenin's organizational policies, Luxemburg emphasizes that the socialist movement must remain ready to incorporate spontaneous worker actions (p. 256). These selections demonstrate Luxemburg's anger and disappointment with German Social Democracy. The Russian Revolution also reinforces Luxemburg's unwavering commitment to democracy, which she saw as the necessary twin of socialism. Speaking directly to Trotsky and Lenin (whom she also praises) Luxemburg argues that however problematic democracy may be in practice, the solution lies in more democracy, not less (p. 302).

In the fourth section we find the "Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis in German Social Democracy," and several short pieces collected under the title "Speeches and Letters on War and Revolution, 1918-19," including "Order Reigns in Berlin." The "Junius Pamphlet" was written in 1915 while Luxemburg was in prison for opposing World War I, and it contains a stinging critique of the SPD for its capitulation to liberal and militarist interests in the lead up to war. Luxemburg considered the SPD's support for war credits to be nothing less than the betrayal of the working class by its own party (p. 313). Of Germany, once the vanguard of International Social Democracy, she writes, "Nowhere was the organization of the proletariat made so completely subservient to imperialism" (p. 315). This text powerfully demonstrates the centrality of imperialism to Luxemburg's analysis of capitalism; she always remains a harsh critic of imperialistic practices (especially war) which she contends are inexorably linked to capitalist expansion. In her analysis, European world war reveals the hypocrisy of the imperialist civilizing mission as Europe itself suffers the total destruction that capitalism and imperialism have already wrought on foreign soil (p. 339). Luxemburg concludes the pamphlet with a lament for the tremendous loss which the international socialist movement has suffered, writing that "nine-tenths of these millions [dead] came from the ranks of the working class" (p. 340). In addition to foreshadowing the split in the SPD party, the "Junius Pamphlet"

offers an impassioned analysis of World War I, written at the moment it was becoming clear just how deadly a supposedly quick and defensive war would be. This brief, accessible text could easily be assigned in undergraduate courses.

In their introduction, Hudis and Anderson wrote that they hoped to show "the full range of Luxemburg's contributions by including for the first time in one volume substantial extracts from both her economic and political writings," and in this goal they have succeeded (p. 8). The *_Reader_* successfully shows the breadth of Luxemburg's scholarship. In addition to providing an important analysis of Marxist theory and revolutionary politics, the texts here are historically instructive regarding the ideological and political fractures in German Social Democracy before and during the First World War. As a major reference book on Luxemburg's life and thought however, the *_Reader_* does have some significant shortcomings. While the introduction and endnotes evince an impressive familiarity with the secondary literature and provide useful historical context, this volume does not include a bibliography of either Luxemburg's complete works or of relevant secondary sources. The editors have carefully culled the Luxemburg canon for the best of her work, yet it would have been helpful if they had noted what important work they had to leave out. A timeline of Luxemburg's life would also be useful. Finally the text has quite a few typos and other small errors; especially frustrating is the miss-pagination over a large section of endnotes. These problems aside, the editors have done an admirable job of presenting Luxemburg's life and work in a form appropriate to both general and specialist audiences. *_The Rosa Luxemburg Reader_* demonstrates that Luxemburg's thought and place in history are ripe for reappraisal and should help encourage what would be much welcomed new scholarship.

Notes

[1]. Raya Dunayevskaya, *_Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution_*. 2nd ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 89.

[2]. Studies that explicitly or implicitly compare the Herero and Nama massacres, or German colonialism generally, to the Holocaust include, Horst Drechsler, *_Let Us Die Fighting: The Struggle of the Herero and Nama against German Imperialism (1884-1915)_* (London: Zed Press, 1980). Helmut Bley, *_South-West Africa under German Rule, 1894-1914_* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971). For an overview of the historiographical debate surrounding this issue see Tilman Dederig, "The German Herero War of 1904: Revisionism of Genocide or Imaginary Historiography," *_Journal of Southern African Studies_* 19 (1993): pp. 80-88. For a view that argues against comparison of the Herero and Nama massacres with the Holocaust see Gunther Spraul, "Der 'Voelkermord' an den Herero: Untersuchungen zur einer neuen Kontinuitaetsthese," *_Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht_* 39 (1988): pp. 713-739.

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