

INTRODUCTION: TRANSMITTING ROSA LUXEMBURG

Filippo Menozzi

In a 1894 essay originally published in Polish in *Sprawa Robotnicza*, entitled ‘What are the Origins of May Day?’, Marxist intellectual and activist Rosa Luxemburg made some thoughtful comments on the significance of International Workers’ Day. She explained how the origins of the celebrations dated back to 1889, when the International Workers’ Congress decided that ‘the workers of all lands would demonstrate together for the eight-hour day on May 1, 1890’.¹ That decision would play a very important role in subsequent history, even though the delegates who agreed on that demonstration, at that time, could not predict the future resonance of their undertaking. As Luxemburg wrote:

No one spoke of a repetition of the holiday for the next years. Naturally no one could predict the lightning-like way in which this idea would succeed and how quickly it would be adopted by the working classes ... The first of May demanded the introduction of the eight-hour day. But even after this goal was reached, May Day was not given up. As long as the struggle of the workers against the bourgeoisie and the ruling class continues, as long as all demands are not met, May Day will be the yearly expression of these demands. And, when better days dawn, when the working class of the world has won its deliverance then too humanity will probably celebrate May Day in honor of the bitter struggles and the many sufferings of the past (no pag.)

Luxemburg’s reflections on May Day are important because they reveal a deep and thought-provoking way of thinking about memory and cultural transmission. They indicate, suggestively, that struggles taking place in the past sometimes surprise us, in a ‘lightning-like way’, by their anticipatory force in inspiring struggles of the future, forms of resistance that have not yet taken shape. The event of May Day - the first strike, the first demonstration - turned out to be less of a one-off event and more like a ‘continuing institution’. Most importantly, the unique historical occurrence lived on after its own success, becoming a recurring historical commemoration even after the objective of the first demonstration had been reached. If May Day is still significant today, this happens first and foremost because it is a way of remembering the first event, the spark that initiated the struggle for bettering the conditions of workers. But it is not just a question of memory. In fact, May Day is still

1. Rosa Luxemburg, ‘What are the Origins of May Day?’, 1894: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1894/02/may-day.htm> Accessed 1 May 2018.

recurring because the struggle continues: 'as long as all demands are not met, May Day will be the yearly expression of these demands'. May Day thus keeps a channel open between past and present, revealing that multiple times are part of a common, unbroken history of struggle and resistance, a history that has not yet ended.. Celebrating May Day means fighting in the present, acknowledging that an internationalist, organised, class struggle is still imperative. It means stating that oppression continues, and so does resistance. Intriguingly, Rosa Luxemburg also noted that the significance of May Day would become a form of honouring the 'bitter struggles' and sufferings *of the past* only when, in a still unforeseen future, pre-history would become history and the world would be freed from the subjugation of the oppressed classes.

Rosa Luxemburg's reflections on May Day suggest a mode of cultural transmission that could be applied to her own life, thought and politics, in a similarly passionate and inspired way. Indeed, it might be suggested that Rosa Luxemburg will be honoured, remembered, and celebrated as a figure *from the past* only when, in a future still to-come, the goals of social justice, peace and equality that she fought for are realised. As long as these struggles continue, Rosa Luxemburg's oeuvre cannot be safely locked back in the past and peacefully 'remembered'. As long as bitter struggles and widespread suffering continue, she is still living, a living substance that is part of the present and can inspire political engagement. The wider meaning of declaring Rosa Luxemburg our contemporary, then, is that the objectives she struggled for are still to-come, and the forms of violence and oppression she struggled against are still part of the material social conditions of today's world. This coevalness can be pronounced because many issues at the heart of her thought and activism are still with us: from imperialism and the national question to what Nancy Fraser calls the 'back-stories' of capitalism and the need for what Harry Harootunian aptly describes as the 'figuration of a deprovincialized Marx'.² Most importantly, the transmission of Rosa Luxemburg today should not be seen as a mere gesture establishing the correctness (or otherwise) of her theses, as if an intellectual legacy were a disposable object undergoing some kind of obsolescence. As Joseph Fracchia notes in a compelling essay on Luxemburg's 'untimely timeliness', contemporary approaches to Luxemburg should avoid locking her into a pre-war world radically different from ours, but equally they should avoid seeing her - as Istvan Meszaros suggests - as merely a forever-anachronistic figure: always too early, ahead of a time that has not yet come. Fracchia suggests that, if Luxemburg's theories are always too early or too late, perhaps 'their time is now'.³ And, indeed, the current aliveness of Rosa Luxemburg's thought can be demonstrated by the extensive revival of her thought in the past decade. Among many publications, mention should be made of the ongoing Verso edition of her complete works, led by Peter Hudis and Paul LeBlanc; a new edition of her letters, edited by Georg Adler, Peter Hudis, and Annelies Laschitzka; Riccardo Bellofiore's edited collection *Rosa Luxemburg and the Critique of Political Economy*; special issues

2. Nancy Fraser, 'The Significance of Rosa Luxemburg for Contemporary Social Theory', 2013: <https://soundcloud.com/rosaluxstiftung/nancy-fraser-the-significance> Accessed 1 May 2018; Harry Harootunian, *Marx after Marx*, New York: Columbia UP, 2015, p116.

3. Joseph Fracchia, 'The Untimely Timeliness of Rosa Luxemburg', in Bonefeld, Werner, and Kosmas Psychopedis (eds.), *Human dignity: social autonomy and the critique of capitalism*, London, Routledge, 2017, pp105-130.

4. See Elaine Coburn, 'Rosa Luxemburg's Political Economy: Contributions to Contemporary Political Theory and Practice', *Socialist Studies/Études Socialistes*, 6(2), 2011, pp38-42; and Hillel Ticktin, 'Rosa Luxemburg's Concept of Crisis in a Contemporary Theoretical Context', *Critique*, 40(3), 2012, pp309-321; Riccardo Bellofiore (ed), *Rosa Luxemburg and the Critique of Political Economy*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2009; Nancy Holmstrom, 'Rosa Luxemburg: A Legacy for Feminists?', *Socialist Studies/Études Socialistes*, 12(1), 2017, pp187-190. See also Ranabir Samaddar, 'A Post-colonial Critique of Capital Accumulation Today': http://kapacc.blog.rosalux.de/files/2014/02/RLS.essay_.pdf, accessed 1 May 2018; and, a new edition as we went to press, Jon Nixon, *Rosa Luxemburg and the Struggle for Democratic Renewal*, London, Pluto, 2018.

5. Kate Evans, *Red Rosa. A Graphic Biography of Rosa Luxemburg* (ed. Paul Buhle), London, Verso, 2015.

of the journals *Critique* and *Socialist Studies*; and Nancy Holmstrom's recent thoughts on Luxemburg as a model for current feminist struggles.⁴ Similarly, the success of Kate Evans's graphic biography, *Red Rosa*, published in 2015, testifies to a cogent revival of this intellectual in the early twenty-first century.⁵

As a further testament to the significance of Rosa Luxemburg, this special issue aims to contribute to the transmission of this vital legacy by suggesting questions about relevance, memory and resonance: how does Luxemburg speak to us, how do her thoughts echo with our own? How can we prevent the legacy of Rosa Luxemburg from becoming a fixed heritage, a thing of the past? Accordingly, writing on Rosa Luxemburg *as our contemporary* should be seen as an act and a project, rather than a factual statement. All essays and interviews included in this special issue, from many points of view, grapple with the central question of how to assess the contemporaneity of Rosa Luxemburg without turning her into an object of commemoration. Helen Scott's essay, 'Capitalism in "all corners of the earth": Luxemburg and Globalization', shows that Luxemburg is pivotal to formulating a non-Eurocentric Marxism and to forging new international working-class solidarities, thereby contributing to a rethinking of the political and cultural aspects of a globalised world. Peter Hudis's essay, 'Non-Linear Pathways to Social Transformation: Rosa Luxemburg and the Post-Colonial Condition', offers a compelling exploration of the significance of Rosa Luxemburg's analysis of non-Western, pre-capitalist formations, especially the communal societies that pre-dated imperialist modernity in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Stephen Morton's 'Capital Accumulation and Debt Colonialism after Rosa Luxemburg' connects Luxemburg's thought to debt colonialism, dispossession, and theories of the capitalist world-system. Intriguingly, Morton proposes to build on Luxemburg in order to formulate 'an alternative idea of the world as commons'. Paul LeBlanc's 'Rosa Luxemburg and the Heart of Darkness' situates Luxemburg alongside literary representations of the violence of imperialism, reinstating the contemporary relevance of Luxemburg's critique of colonial atrocities. Kanishka Chowdhury's 'Rosa Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital*, Postcolonial Theory, and the Problem of Present Day Imperialisms' rereads Luxemburg's theory of accumulation alongside the theory of a 'new imperialism', offering thought-provoking insights into the concept of capitalism's hinterland, and drawing links between economic processes and political violence in the twenty-first century. Ingo Schmidt's 'Neoliberal capitalism and its crises in Europe: Towards a Luxemburgian interpretation' explores the relevance of Luxemburg to understanding neoliberal capitalism and its current crisis. This special issue also features my own essay on Luxemburg and the concept of history, an interview with Evelin Wittich, and an interview with Benita Parry, which address various aspects of Rosa Luxemburg in relation to postcolonialism and the significance of locating Luxemburg as a global and European thinker.