

Rosa Luxemburg's Accumulation Theory and the SPD

A Peripheral Perspective

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In the last decades, Rosa Luxemburg's theory of capital accumulation has been recovered in the light of our time, although the same old criticisms arise. The most common criticisms of Luxemburg's economic theory are that she was fatalistic and underconsumptionist.¹ These go back to her time and to the discussions about collapse theory in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). According to some authors,² she introduced a theory in which capitalism should fall apart on its own even if the working class do nothing. At her time, the SPD sorely discussed the historical necessity of socialism as an evolution of the capitalist mode of production; this was called the collapse debate.³ This debate was based on Marx's assertion that capitalism tends to make workers' living conditions progressively worse, amplifying impoverishment. So, as long as capitalism exists, more and more people would be part of the working class.

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- 1 For example, David Harvey: *The New Imperialism*, New York 2003.
 - 2 As Miron I. Nachimson and Gustav Eckstein (1875–1916). See: *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals*, in *Dresdener Volkszeitung*, n. 17, year 24, Dresden, January 22, 1913; and Gustav Eckstein, *Crítica à Acumulação do Capital de Rosa Luxemburgo*, in *Rosa Luxemburgo: A Acumulação do Capital. Contribuição ao Estudo Econômicos do Imperialismo*, São Paulo 1985, pp. 405–416.
 - 3 See Lucio Colletti: *El marxismo y el «derrumbe» del capitalismo*, 3rd edition, Mexico City 1985. This book summarizes quite well this debate. It includes excerpts from Eduard Bernstein, Mijail I. Tugán-Baranovski, Rudolf Hilferding (1877–1941), Karl Kautsky (1854–1938).

The revisionists argued that Marx was wrong about impoverishment and therefore that the basic social-democratic analysis was also inaccurate. According to the revisionists, the workers' living conditions have not got worse but better; capitalism would thus not simply fall apart as a necessity of historical evolution. It could be improved. Luxemburg discussed this with revisionists since 1898. In her book »The Accumulation of Capital,« published in 1913, she developed an accumulation theory that has as a logical conclusion the fall of capitalism without any struggle since this mode of production cannot survive without being expanded over non-capitalist societies and non-explored land.⁴ So, at some point, the system could not be reproduced, because there would neither be land nor people to conquer and start the accumulation process again. That was understood from her time on as a fatalistic point of view. Though she was explaining the historical and logical movement of capital accumulation, for Luxemburg, history must be done by the workers in a day-by-day struggle, and it is impossible to determine a »line« of history only by mechanical assumptions; the subjective factor is determinant.⁵ Another widespread criticism is that Luxemburg was an underconsumptionist, which means she allegedly analyzed capitalist society only from the circulation point of view, which means the problems of capitalism would have been confined to the distribution problems of the social product. So thought her opposers. The revisionists believed that capitalism could be reformed when the global social product was fairly divided.

Luxemburg's starting question was: who consumes the surplus value represented in products? She put her problem in the circulation sphere, because, as she said, Marx had no time to analyze this sphere, dying before finishing the last two volumes of »Das Kapital.« Based

4 See Michael Krätke: Rosa Luxemburg und die Analyse des gegenwärtigen Kapitalismus, in: Narihiko Ito/Annelies Lashitza/Ottokar Luban (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg. Ökonomische und historisch-politische Aspekte ihres Werkes, Berlin 2010, pp. 130–174.

5 See Michael Löwy: *Método Dialético e Teoria Política*, Rio de Janeiro 1975.

on that, some of her critics said that she was attributing the problem of capitalism to the lack of consumers, ignoring the problem of production. Actually, Luxemburg agreed that the central problem of the capitalist social system is the way production works, based on private property and exploitation. However, to understand the whole society, one must analyze both spheres – production and circulation – because together they form social reproduction, more precisely, enlarged reproduction. When she states that capitalism needs to expand over other societies to reproduce itself, she does not mean only by selling products. She talks about acquiring raw material and labor power to feed capitalist industries in developed countries. Therefore, she is trying to fill the hole in Marx's analysis by connecting production and circulation processes to understand the enlarged reproduction movement.

In a few words, these are the main criticisms of Luxemburg's accumulation theory that prevail until today, though less strongly. Being a hard-to-ignore figure in the socialist movement during her lifetime and afterward, a segregation in her thought was set: she was sometimes right when talking about politics and completely wrong when carrying out economic analysis.⁶ The problem, however, is that Luxemburg did not herself segregate economics from politics. She always thought in terms of political economy, in which one cannot be understood without the other. So, when reading her texts, it is impossible to understand her political writings if one does not consider her understanding of the capitalist economy at each conjuncture, because it changes too. If one wants to claim her thought, it must be done as a whole. One may criticize her economic theory but has to understand

6 This segregation works for the ones that followed her political thought, because the majority of socialists considered her only as a workers' martyr, but as an idealistic and therefore politically and economically wrong theoretician.

its relationship to her political position in the 1910s and the debate in which she was involved with German social democracy.

This is the central point of this article and of my research. I am aware of texts dedicated to her political thought and those dedicated to her economic thought, and my point is to unify the two perspectives. Even her book »The Accumulation of Capital« has a political view and intention. I am also aware that some texts have already stressed this point, but I am doing it from a peripheral country, therefore, with a peripheral perspective, much like Luxemburg's was, and basing myself on original sources, relating her political economic thought to contemporary debates on her. Luxemburg's accumulation theory responded to a political necessity to make the SPD understand that capitalism could not be reformed or driven to a revolution through parliament, but rather that it had to be revolutionized by a conscious working class. Otherwise, humanity would set on its way towards barbarism. Some may say that Luxemburg's motto »*socialism or barbarism*« would be settled only in 1916 and that by 1913 she still believed in the masses as the major political force against imperialist war.⁷ That is true. By 1913 she believed the masses would prevent war, but only if they were led to it. Socialism was still a staggering certainty, but barbarism was the spectrum haunting Europe at that moment.⁸

7 See Isabel Loureiro: Rosa Luxemburg. Os Dilemas da Ação Revolucionária, São Paulo 1995.

8 See the debate between Michael Löwy and Norman Geras on this theme. Norman Geras, Rosa Luxemburg. Barbarism and The Collapse of Capitalism, in: New Left Review, 1/82, 1973, pp. 17–37; Norman Geras: A Atualidade de Rosa Luxemburgo, Lisboa, 1978; Michael Löwy: Rosa Luxemburg. A Re-Assessment, in: New Left Review 101–102/1977, no. 1, pp. 138–142.

Germany and the Age of Empires

Rosa Luxemburg was a Jewish Polish woman. This fact must always be remembered because it influences her perspective. At that time, Poland was not a national state. The territory we know today as Poland was divided amongst three empires: the Russian, the German and the Austro-Hungarian. This went back to the 18th century, and even Marx had discussed the »Polish question.« Luxemburg and her Polish comrades had a particular point of view and defended the idea that the fight in Poland should be based on class, not nation. This is related to the fact that the industrial development of Poland was strictly connected to the Russian Empire.⁹

The Polish question itself brings up the conjuncture of what historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917 – 2012) called »The Age of Empire.« First, the region was divided among three empires, specifically those that had a central role in the events from the end of the 19th century to the First World War. Second, this discussion leads to the matters of industrialization, class struggle and, consequently, the workers' movement.

According to Hobsbawm, the age of empire's seven economic characteristics were as follows. First, a »more broad-based economy,« meaning that there was a larger number of industrial and industrializing countries and more areas integrated into the national trade. Germany and the United States had gone through phases of rapid industrial development and, therefore, a larger number of their inhabitants were integrated into the capitalist trade economy, not to mention the number of immigrants the United States received at this time to strengthen its labor power, which meant more people entering the capitalist trade economy. This leads to the second characteristic: Britain was not ruling the world's economy alone anymore; it had Germany and the United States as its main competitors, though

9 Rosa Luxemburg: *El Desarrollo Industrial de Polonia y otros Escritos sobre el Problema Nacional*, Cuadernos de Pasado y Presente, Mexico City 1979.

the global dependence on some of Britain's services such as finances, trading and shipping also grew. Third, the second technological revolution was in progress. The telephone, the wireless telegraph, cinema, the automobile, aspirin, the bicycle, the well-known developments in electricity and chemistry, and the combustion engine were some of the technological novelties, although Hobsbawm says, »for the contemporaries, the major innovation consisted in the updating of the first industrial revolution.«¹⁰ Therefore, despite the invention of the automobile, railways were built all over Europe and other continents. Fourth, the concentration of capital allowing the formation of big companies and the application of »scientific methods« to organize production were top trends of the period. Taylorism was applied all over the production chain. Fifth, there were big changes in the consumption and development of the mass market. Mass consumers started playing a bigger role than wealthy people, and products such as gas cookers and bananas were produced or shipped to them. Sixth, there was the growth of the service sector of the economy, both public and private. A lot of workers were hired to work in the offices where the capital was being managed. Seventh, the state started playing a major role in economic politics. After the Great Depression of 1873, liberalism was not so convincing anymore, so the state appeared as an important piece to make things flow correctly for the benefit of profit.

Considering this panorama, it is possible to see all these themes in Luxemburg's texts. For instance, the sequence of texts called »Wirtschaftliche und Socialpolitische Rundschau«¹¹ dealt with the majority of them: international competition for land to exploit, the growth of French bureaucracy and the question of civil servants, the growth of big companies forming cartels and trusts, the growth of the

10 Eric Hobsbawm: *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914*, First Vintage Books Edition, New York 1989, p. 52.

11 In Rosa Luxemburg: *Gesammelte Werke*, Berlin, vol. 1/1, 1974, pp. 278–294, 308–317, 326–347, and 352–360.

United States economy, the increase in railways throughout the world, and so on. Luxemburg was quite aware of her contemporary scenario and was a great analyst of her époque's political economy, having written a number of texts about it.

As far as this contribution is concerned, Germany's context is the most important since the subjects discussed here are related to Luxemburg's debates on the SPD. Of course, the matters of industrialization, class struggle and the workers' movement can be expanded to the international social democracy scene at that time and include her position towards the national state. But I am convinced that if one understands her debates among the Germans, one can also understand her positions on other subjects. In the end, they are all related to her understanding of how capitalism works. From the start, Luxemburg had been conducting an analysis based on her reality, especially Germany's reality, and making propositions to lead the proletariat to the revolution, or at least closer to it.

Germany at this time was a young nation state, unified in 1871 by the hands of Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) and the Prussian sword. In 1888, Wilhelm II (1859–1941) rose to the throne and changed the strategy towards the world planned by Bismarck, who was withdrawn from his role as chancellor in 1890. Between 1888 and 1914, Wilhelm II tried to make himself the German figure, the expression of the nation, and started an expansion policy.¹² Imperialistic disputes in Africa, America and Asia were put at the center of German foreign politics, and the race to dominate the largest part of the world began for Germany. The reign of Wilhelm II until the beginning of the First World War was one in a context of great economic growth everywhere in the world, including Germany. Germany's net domestic product

12 Karl Erich Born: *Von der Reichsgründung bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg*, Gebhardt Handbuch der deutschen Geschichte, vol. 16, Munich 1975.

grew by 75 % from 1895 to 1913, while wages grew by 25 %.¹³ Germany was expanding its industrial and farming production and looking for markets to sell its products. As for German domestic politics, the bourgeoisie was not totally unified around themes such as tariffs and the military budget, and there were debates in the German parliament around these specific themes and the state budget as a whole.

There were also disputes within the bourgeoisie between the agrarians and the industrials. The agrarians wanted to protect their corn production from competition from the United States, so they wanted to raise tariffs. The industrials, on the other hand, were afraid that this policy would damage their commerce with other countries in retaliation, because even though, in this age of empires, disputes about foreign markets and colonies outside Europe are well-known, the industrialized countries were important markets between themselves.

During Wilhelm II's rule, there were many attempts to conciliate these interests, especially because social democracy was expanding its influence among the workers and the necessity thus arose to stop the socialist movement. This was the »*Sammlungspolitik*« that also supported the imperialistic policy of Wilhelm's government. According to historian Ulrich Herbert, it worked on the basis of raising tariffs and investing in naval power. This way, both agrarians and industrials would be satisfied and German imperialism could go on its way. It did not always work well, since from time to time, budgets, especially the military budget, had to be submitted to parliament and new agreements and alliances had to be made. But it did work well in the Herero crisis of 1907 and in breaking the ideals of social democracy from inside.

13 See Walther G. Hoffmann et al.: Net Domestic Product by Economic Sector (1870–1913), in: Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866–1890, German History in Documents and Images, 7.7.2020. Online: http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1743.

In 1906, because of the Herero war in Southwest Africa, where Germany had a colony, the government shut down parliament and called new elections for 1907. The rightists were especially successful in their campaign against the SPD: they inflated national feelings and campaigned claiming social democrats were anti-nationals. In the elections of 1907, the SPD lost almost half of its deputies in the German parliament. This deepened the discussions about tactics inside the party and empowered the right wing, since they continued using the tactic of bargaining with the bourgeoisie and were indirectly supported by some leaders of the party after 1907. There was a lack of understanding about colonialism and militarism in relation to capital, and the majority of the party felt the necessity of stressing its patriotic point of view, stifling the differences inside the organization, especially in relation to political tactics and strategies.¹⁴

This was the historical context in which Luxemburg acted during her life in Germany. We must keep in mind that she was originally from Poland and never stopped taking action there. Therefore, she was an outsider in many ways: as a woman talking about big theories and political strategies; as a Polish citizen against the independence of her country; and as a European coming from a peripheral country in the continent.

Main Aspects of Luxemburg's Theory

A summary of Rosa Luxemburg's accumulation theory is necessary to clarify how all the political-economic problems related above are explained and intertwined in her theory. In 1913, Luxemburg pub-

¹⁴ See Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands abgehalten zu Esse vom 15. bis 21 September 1907, 7.7.2020. Online: <http://library.fes.de/parteitage/pdf/pt-jahr/pt-1907.pdf>.

lished her most relevant work, »The Accumulation of Capital.« According to the German Social Democratic Party's protocol of 1913, its first edition had a print run of 2000 copies, and each copy was sold at 6 Marks and published by the party's publishing house Buchhandlung Vorwärts. The debates aroused around her theory were enormous and directly connected to the discussions inside the party at that moment.¹⁵ Luxemburg's theory basically states that capitalism needs to expand over other modes of production, stealing their raw material and labor power and transforming them into capitalist areas at the end of the process. She describes capitalism's development as war-driven and intrinsically violent. The system is based on land grabbing and therefore develops by destroying other societies.

Luxemburg developed her theory from a problem she found in Marx's analysis of capitalist social reproduction. He did not analyze the circulation sphere satisfactorily because, as Luxemburg argued, Marx did not have the time, as he died before he could finish the last two volumes of »Das Kapital.« Marx had explained how capitalist production works, and Luxemburg agreed that the central problem of this social system rested in the way production works based on private property. However, to understand the whole society, one has to analyze both the production and circulation spheres because together they form social reproduction, more precisely, enlarged reproduction. On this matter, Marx's analysis was not enough because capitalist reproduction cannot be fully understood in a society based only on workers and capitalists. Capitalism needs other modes of production

15 According to Annelies Laschitzka, almost all social-democratic newspapers published some sort of review on Luxemburg's book, only Franz Mehring's (1846–1919) positiv review was published in 25 different newspapers. See Michael Krätke: *The Luxemburg Debate. The Beginnings of Marxian Macroeconomics*, Paper presented at the International Rosa Luxemburg Conference, Wuhan University, 2006; Annelies Laschitzka: *Im Lebensrausch, trotz alledem. Rosa Luxemburg, eine Biographie*, Berlin, 2000; Rosa Rosa Gomes: *Rosa Luxemburgo. Crise e Revolução*, Cotia 2018.

to reproduce itself on a larger scale, i. e. capitalism is intrinsically expansionist.

Before coming to this conclusion, Luxemburg presented her problem and wrote a history of it. The first two sections of her book are actually the history of political economy theories on the theme of enlarged reproduction. She somehow fulfilled her quote in one of her classes' notes when she said, »there is no decent book on the history of political economy. Only a good Marxist could write it.«¹⁶

She thoroughly analyzed the reproduction problem from François Quesnay up until Marx. The first section of »The Accumulation of Capital« follows Marx's structure in section 3, volume 2 of »Das Kapital.« She follows this script to present the problems she found in section 3 – the most incomplete, according to her.

Luxemburg states that capital reproduction has two specific characteristics: it is based on exchange and on crisis. The issue of the crisis, if it could be avoided or if it was essential in the capital mode of production, was a central discussion in the collapse debate. But Luxemburg does not follow this line in »The Accumulation«; on the contrary, she said, »Periodical cycles and crises are specific phases of reproduction in a capitalist system of economy, but not the whole of this process. In order to demonstrate the pure implications of capitalist reproduction we must rather consider it quite apart from the periodical cycles and crises.«¹⁷ That is why she does not analyze the form of crisis in the capitalist system, rather she researches the movement of enlarged reproduction without disturbances.

That is how she found a problem in Marx's analysis; he did not answer the question of who consumes the surplus value. After establishing her starting point, she makes a history of the theories that dealt with the question of whether capital-enlarged reproduction is

16 Bundesarchiv, Nachlass Rosa Luxemburg, in: BArch NY 4002/16, fol 101.

17 Rosa Luxemburg: *The Accumulation of Capital*, London and New York 2003, p. 7.

possible or not and whether it has a limit. She presents the debates associating them with their specific conjunctures. In a lot of the issues about the different authors that she brings to the fore, the problem of foreign markets or commerce appears, and she examines the way some of them analyze their role in social reproduction. There is a division between authors who accept the accumulation of capital inside national borders and others who analyze this movement on a global scale, making it impossible in the long-term.

After establishing the point of the debate until her time, Luxemburg develops her theory in the third section of the book, which is divided into three parts: chapters to summarize Marx's examination of reproduction schemes and to present her thesis; chapters describing the historical development of capital accumulation; and chapters to describe specific methods and their roles in the imperialism phase (loans, tariffs and militarism).

During the historical presentation, Luxemburg emphasizes the means of transportation as one of the most important instruments capitalism uses to expand over unexplored land – back then, mostly railways, as Hobsbawm stresses. Luxemburg describes that these railways opened space for capital to settle, destroying former and different ways of life that were not based on the exchange of commodities. Railways appear in Luxemburg's book as an important character, opening ground for capital investment and devastating the native societies that did not fit in with the profit logic of capital.

In Brazilian history, one episode illustrates what Luxemburg describes: the *Contestado War* between 1912 and 1916. The movement, started by religious issues, grew with the gathering of mostly land workers expelled from their lands by the construction of a railway by the Brazil Railway Company, people left unemployed by the same company, and former employees of the Southern Brazil Lumber and Colonization Company. Both companies were connected to Percival Farquhar (1864–1953), an American entrepreneur. The rebels wanted the land, a change to the railway route, and the deposition of the

president, among other things. They were brutally beaten down by the army and state troops.¹⁸ This rebellion was caused by the advance of foreign capital that displaced peasants, exploiting them and the local natural resources, since the land around the route was given to the lumber company that then had the right to exploit them.

As countries develop, they look for new areas to exploit and to compete on a global scale for consumers, labor power and raw materials – this is imperialism. Luxemburg defines imperialism as the stage where capital competes on a global scale for accumulation areas. At this moment, violence and robbery continue to be the soul of the accumulation process, which is based, according to Luxemburg, on three major operational methods: loans, protectionism and militarism. These were the main subjects of Luxemburg's time; as stated above, these policies were not a consensus, not even among the bourgeoisie, but there were different interests to be satisfied, and the state was responsible for aligning and pacifying them. Luxemburg explains why these things are combined in the capitalist society and why the socialist movement cannot use them to improve the workers' lives. Loans are a way to submit recently independent countries to the necessities of capital in the center. They also allow foreign over-accumulated capital to find space for capitalization, expanding its limits. The tariff policies function in the same way. While central countries protect their industries and markets with protectionism, they demand that colonies or former colonies adopt free trade. This way, the industrialized countries protect their markets and exploit the sales possibilities and investments in the conquered areas.

Brazil, for example, won its independence as a national state after having shipped quantities of gold and silver, among other things, to

18 Boris Fausto: *História do Brasil*, São Paulo 2004; Rogério Rosa Rodrigues: *Guerra do Contestado*, in: *Dicionário Histórico-Biográfico Brasileiro*, Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil, 8.7.2020. Online: <http://cpdoc.fgv.br/sites/default/files/verbetes/primeira-republica/GUERRA%20DO%20CONTESTADO.pdf>.

Portugal and then to England for centuries. Brazil actually had to buy its independence since a loan was taken out from England to pay an indemnification to Portugal. The most important Brazilian historian, Caio Prado Junior (1907–1990), said that, from this point until the beginning of the Brazilian Republic in 1889, the Brazilian economy had to live with foreign loans and that it would be impossible to have an independent economy: »the deficit will be covered by inflows of foreign capital, above all public loans that started to come to Brazil effectively since the country was franchised out.«¹⁹

After 1822, Brazil was allowed to sell to countries other than Portugal; it was a free country and had the freedom to produce goods for exportation, although those goods were all commodities. Foreign capital owned the most important sectors of the Brazilian economy and bought its natural resources, and the country was completely contingent on the international interests of investments and market movements. Caio Prado says that, after independence, »to a large extent, it was according to English commercial interests that the new Brazilian economy oriented itself.«²⁰

Luxemburg establishes this relationship between center and periphery, stressing that while the former protects its areas of influence from other states, it also keeps the latter in a submissive position as areas to execute their overaccumulation or overproduction, as seen in Brazil's example. With these methods, capitalism creates not only a difference between center and periphery but also different levels among peripheral countries, since they play different roles in the system.

Finally, the most important element of capitalism is militarism. It was an essential weapon in the age of empire in the competition among nations on the world stage. Militarism acts in two ways: first, as a military force, destroying other societies and making sure the

19 Caio Prado Júnior: *História Econômica do Brasil*, São Paulo 1987, p. 133.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

workers stay put; second, as an area for accumulation itself. In the arms industry, the state creates an effective demand controlled by the capitalists themselves since they control the modern state. It is not the only area where the state represents a demand for capital. In »Social Reform or Revolution,« Luxemburg compares militarism and culture, saying that both represent demand when the investment is made with the state budget, but the demand from militarism is continuous because of technological development and the growth of conflicts. Militarism is not just a force to conquer and submit to, it is also an area of investment. Both ways lead to the continuous growth of militarism.

These three methods are implemented by the modern state of the central countries. This is one type of centralized state, but not the only one. Luxemburg also talks about an Eastern state that is also centralized and despotic. Where there is an Eastern state, there seems to be an easier way for capitalism to take possession: by dominating the central power, the colonizer dominates the whole or the majority of the territory. »When the War of Secession interfered with the import of American cotton, causing the notorious ›cotton famine‹ in the Lancashire district, new and immense cotton plantations sprang up in Egypt almost at once, as if by magic. Here it was Oriental despotism, combined with an ancient system of bondage, which had created a sphere of activity for European capital.«²¹ The modern state imposes loans and financial policies, determines the tariffs, and controls the military force. This means that the state is the fundamental agent of the accumulation process. The indispensable instruments or methods of accumulation are controlled by the state. It is possible to see this in Germany's parliamentary debates, since they revolved around these subjects. This way, Luxemburg demonstrates that the idea of an automatic reproduction circuit is a complete abstraction since without imperialism and its methods, state and state demand, there is no capitalism.

21 Rosa Luxemburg: *The Accumulation of Capital*, p. 338.

It is clear from this summary that Luxemburg's theory was entirely based on the analysis of capitalism and its real development until that time. Nevertheless, she received harsh criticisms from both wings of the party, left and right. Some of them did not accept her critique of Marx's reproduction schemes and analysis.²² Others had problems with the logic of her line of thought.²³ Her theory has a logical ending where capitalism cannot survive because Earth and non-capitalist societies have a limit, so at some point, the system cannot be further reproduced because there would not be any spaces left to conquer and so restart the accumulation process. However, she says that before this final stage where capitalism has nowhere left to expand, the workers would start the revolution. A lot of critics called her fatalistic because of that. But it was a logical ending, not a fatalistic one;²⁴ Luxemburg always stressed that *men* make history, it does not go on by itself,²⁵ and that capitalism always has ways of recovering, as is suggested by militarism being an open door of endless opportunity to enlarged accumulation. »Capital itself ultimately controls this automatic and rhythmic movement of militarist production through the legislature and a press whose function is to mould so-called ›public opinion‹. That is why this particular province of capitalist accumulation at first seems capable of infinite expansion.«²⁶

The problem of her book seems to be that it explained to German Social Democrats why they should not make alliances with the bourgeoisie and that no war could be justified, since every war was an im-

22 Such as Gustav Eckstein that published his review in the *Vorwärts* on February 16, 1913, and Anton Pannekoek (1873–1960) that published his review in the *Bremer Bürger-Zeitung* on January 29, 1913.

23 Such as Miron I. Nachimson that published a review in the *Dresdner Volkszeitung* on January 21–22, 1913, and Max Schippel (1859–1928) that published his critique in the *Sozialistische Monatshefte* in 1913. *Ibid.*

24 Although it seems today that she was entirely right: either the world will end because of a nature collapse, or the proletariat will rise and save humanity.

25 See Löwy: *Método Dialético*.

26 Rosa Luxemburg: *The Accumulation of Capital*, p. 446.

perialistic one. Luxemburg explained that using arguments from the SPD itself, arguments approved in party congresses. Below, we will see how her theory unifies some of the party's understanding of those policies, mainly concerning tariffs and the military budget.

SPD Debates and Luxemburg's Ideas²⁷

What happened to German social democracy between 1898 and 1913? Germany's context of economic growth and improvement of workers' life generated the feeling that capitalism had succeeded and that it was possible to live a good worker's life inside the system – it just needed adjustments. That was the *Zeitgeist*, so to speak, and it formed the basis of the revisionism/reform strategy. One wing of the SPD started arguing that Marx was wrong about the impoverishment of the working class and that it was possible to change the system from inside through elections and parliamentary action.²⁸ The debates inside the party between 1898 and 1913 show that, first, the revisionism/reform debate formed the background to every discussion within the SPD at that time, and second, that at the heart of the matter were differences in analyzing capitalist development and society. Luxemburg joined the party exactly at the moment when this debate was at its peak and threw herself into it.

In 1898, 1899 and 1903, the revisionism debate was at the center of the party's congresses, and the right wing was the biggest problem for the revolutionaries, who were supported by the party leadership

27 See Carl Schorske: *German Social Democracy, 1905–1917. The Development of the Great Schism*, Cambridge, 1993; Bernt Engelmann: *Vorwärts und nicht vergessen. Vom verfolgten Geheimbund zur Kanzlerpartei*, Munich 1989.

28 Eduard Bernstein was the most important revisionist theoretician, but there were the men of reformist practices such as Georg von Vollmar (1850–1922) and Eduard David (1863–1930).

at this time. After 1903, the party leaders and the left wing believed the revisionists had been defeated by the congress resolution, but this resolution stated that the party would stand by the tactics and strategy adopted until then, since these had proven to be successful. This vague resolution allowed the reformists to continue with their practice and, in a way, reaffirmed the role of the election as the central weapon in the socialist struggle, following reformists' ideas.²⁹

When, in 1905 and 1906, the Russian Revolution broke out and strikes rose all over Germany too,³⁰ the official resolutions did not deny the mass strike as an important weapon, but they reaffirmed that the main concern of the party members should be strengthening the organization itself. August Bebel (1840–1913) said at the congress of 1906, »Our point of view is that before we let us in such a great fight, we must first thoroughly organize, agitate, achieve political and economic enlightenment, make the masses conscious and resilient...«³¹ Only then could a successful strike, i.e. a strike controlled by the party direction, be achieved.

This was the moment of rupture between the leftists and the direction of German social democracy. The street struggle had been considered a strategy of the past, according to the direction of social democracy; however, it had emerged as the self-organization of the workers in the struggles of 1905, which was seen as a problem by this direction. The international tensions increased, and Germany was at the center of it. Social democracy presented itself as a big problem for

29 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitagess der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands abgehalten zu Dresden vom 13. bis 20 September 1903, 8.7.2020. Online: <http://library.fes.de/parteitage/pdf/pt-jahr/pt-1903.pdf>.

30 Luiz E. V. Souza: *Espelho Convexo. Os Escritos de Max Weber, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky sobre a Revolução Russa de 1905*, São Paulo 2017.

31 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitagess der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands abgehalten zu Mannheim vom 23. bis 29 September 1906, 8.7.2020. Online: <http://library.fes.de/parteitage/pdf/pt-jahr/pt-1906.pdf>.

the bourgeoisie, who solved it by spreading nationalism in the campaign for the 1907 election.

The internal debates in the SPD around imperialism and nationalism went on. In 1911, when Germany was involved in another crisis around the region of Morocco and almost started a war against France and its allies, the party direction held its former position and did not put up a fight against the German state and its imperialistic policy by refusing a war between nations.³²

This summarizes the context related directly to the reformism agenda – an agenda that believed in possible alliances with progressive forces of the bourgeoisie and the transformation of capitalism from the inside out, taking the growth of the middle classes as a sign of it and the expansion of credit as a way to achieve a socialized economy and better distribution of the social product. The point was that, through credit, smaller enterprises could be financed and the number of shareholders expanded, leading to some kind of economic democracy – as if a lot of people owned the companies. Credit would also play a controlling role in avoiding overproduction. As stated previously, for Luxemburg, credit only expands the limits of capital, allowing it to be capitalized elsewhere, and it also accelerates the rhythm of commodities' circulation.

There were also debates around practical matters, as Luxemburg put it. These practical matters were related to day-by-day life, where the SPD could take concrete action in the class struggle. These were

32 See, for example, the position of Hermann Molkebuhr (1851–1927) in a letter to International Socialist Bureau on the Morocco question. For him, social democracy should focus its forces in the internal affairs, because the German government would not put capitalist interests in danger, so he was against an international demonstration. Rosa Luxemburg: Um Marokko, in: *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3, Berlin 1980, pp. 5–11. See also Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitagés der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands abgehalten in Jena vom 10. bis 16 September 1911, 9.7.2020. Online: <http://library.fes.de/parteitage/pdf/pt-jahr/pt-1911.pdf>.

mainly the military budget, the *Weltpolitik* («world politics») and colonialism, and the tariffs.

In 1900, the party congress discussed the *Weltpolitik* because of the alliance of European powers to combat the Boxer Rebellion in China. The resolution of the congress stated that colonialism was a result of the capital necessity of expanding its investment areas and markets. It also put together colonialism and military growth, as the former needed the latter to conquer new lands. The resolution stated, »the world-wide colonial politics, whose goal is capitalist exploitation and the development of military power as it has shown recently in the move towards China, arises first from the bourgeoisie's greedy desires of new opportunities of application for ever-growing capital, for which the exploitation opportunities at home are not enough anymore, and second from the urge for new sales markets which every country aspires to usurp for itself.«³³ Further on in the text, the resolution also stated, »the ultramarine conquest and robbery politics leads to hostilities and frictions among the rival powers and, as a consequence, to intolerable armament on land and at sea. This politics contains the seed to dangerous international conflicts that put into question the cultural and exchange relations laboriously built in peaceful ways and, finally, make a general disaster possible.«³⁴

Although the main aspects of Luxemburg's thought can be seen in this resolution, there is also a big difference in the perspective of the analysis since Luxemburg sees capitalist development as intrinsically violent in all aspects.

At this same congress, tariffs were also discussed as a point in the matter of commercial transportation, and the party resolution stated that they were for free trade and to be accomplished on a gradual scale.

33 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands abgehalten zu Mainz vom 16. und 17. September 1900, 9.7.2020. Online: <http://library.fes.de/parteitage/pdf/pt-jahr/pt-1900.pdf>.

34 Ibid.

Luxemburg proposed an amendment to this resolution, which was approved. This amendment was »for the principle of ›open doors‹ and against the principle of ›sphere of influence‹ with regard to China and all non-European regions.«³⁵ Though today this can be considered a wrong analysis from the point of view of the colony, or subdued country, Luxemburg does explain in her book the relationships that arise from the unequal trade between developed and undeveloped countries, or the center and periphery of the capitalist system, in which the former try to hold their possessions, prohibiting trade between its areas of influence and rival countries.

Even more interesting on this matter is the speech of Paul Singer (1844–1911), who said that »the workers' funds, which enable the Chinese policy since they come from indirect taxes and customs duties, serve only to give capital the opportunity to produce in China and use Chinese workers as *Lohndrücker*. [...] So, colonial policy uses materials paid mainly by the workers at the expense of the workers themselves.«³⁶ In summary, that is the point of Luxemburg's analysis on how the arms industry can be an area of accumulation itself, since she writes that the money taken from indirect taxes and taxes taken from peasants are the source for investing in the arms industry.³⁷ Naturally, Luxemburg goes deeper on this matter and tries to clarify all mechanisms, but it was not a new idea for Social Democrats when she published her book in 1913.

It is possible to see in the debate around *Weltpolitik* that militarism was a recurrent theme. The government needed to expand its military power continuously; after all, they were in the middle of an arms race and competing for areas of influence. Thus, the military budget was a major and constant dispute. This theme almost never appeared in the

35 Ibid., p. 98.

36 Ibid., p. 157. *Lohndrücker* means that Chinese would keep the wages down, because they were more exploited, which means cheaper from a capital point of view.

37 See Luxemburg: Accumulation.

program of the congresses – except once, at the congress of 1899 – but it was always the subject of debate. In this way, it appeared during the 1899, 1900, 1907, 1911 and 1912 congresses.

The revisionists wanted to use militarism as a bargaining chip, while Rosa Luxemburg and her comrades argued that there is no capitalism without militarism. Luxemburg said at the congress of 1899: »Militarism is the most concrete and important expression of the capitalist class state, and if we do not fight militarism then our struggle against the capitalist state is nothing more than empty phrases.«³⁸ The same topic appeared over and over again, each time with a more conciliatory discourse. After 1907, as stated, the efforts were to make it clear that the SPD was German, after all.

In the congress of 1907, debates about speeches made in the German parliament by August Bebel and Gustav Noske (1868–1946) regarding the military budget were around patriotism, stressing that social democratic – and therefore, working-class – patriotism would be different from bourgeois patriotism. There was supposed to be a proletarian patriotism that would defend the German nation against an attack, meaning that socialists would defend the country in case of a defensive war, which was the argument used by the party in 1914: a war against czarism. The understanding that Russia was the last line of defense of European reaction was an old position in German social democracy, but some of its leaders saw that it had stopped making sense after the Russian Revolution of 1905. As Paul Lensch (1873–1926) said at the 1907 congress, being in favor of a defensive war against czarism made sense in the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s. According to him, after the revolution, if czarist military forces started a European war, that would mean a war to defend itself inside Russian territory,

38 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitage der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands abgehalten zu Hannover vom 9. bis 14. Oktober 1899, 9.7.2020. Online: <http://library.fes.de/parteitage/pdf/pt-jahr/pt-1899.pdf>.

instigating reactionary forces all over Europe.³⁹ After the Revolution of 1905, there was an understanding among leftists that Russia was the revolutionary vanguard of socialism in the world. The right wing of the Social Democrats refused to see this as a world movement or a lesson to be learned, changing the tactics adopted until then, and that is why Luxemburg questioned in the congress of 1905, »are we actually in the year of the glorious Russian revolution or are we still ten years before it?«⁴⁰

In 1907, despite a lot of debate and disagreements, the final word on the speeches' topic was that they would stand by their old position against militarism and that they were satisfied with the parliamentary group, and therefore no resolution was needed.⁴¹ But looking to the discussions about colonialism, military budget, patriotism and so on, it is possible to see that even members of the party direction avoided the analysis relating militarism and capitalism to their previous iterations, so it was not very clear what the position of the party was in relation to militarism. This intensified in the 1910s when Social Democrats had to make a clear statement against militarism, while its leaders, such as Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), actually saw the possibility of peace through diplomacy.⁴² A few years before the war, the most

39 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitage ... 1907, 9.7.2020. Online: <http://library.fes.de/parteitage/pdf/pt-jahr/pt-1907.pdf>.

40 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands abgehalten zu Jena vom 17. bis 23. September 1905, 9.7.2020. Online: <http://library.fes.de/parteitage/pdf/pt-jahr/pt-1905.pdf>.

41 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitage..., 1907, p. 265.

42 In a pamphlet of 1911, Karl Kautsky wrote about the possibility of a world war, but he said that by the Morocco crisis of 1911 it would not happen, because that piece of land was not so important for French and German capitalists, therefore they would not put themselves in danger for it. In this pamphlet, Kautsky talked about social-democracy as a party that fought for

important figures of international socialism were actually saying that the interests of nations were too high to start a war that would destroy everything.⁴³

In the 1910s, for the majority of the party, war was a matter of politics. They thought that the rulers of the Empire could sit together and sign an agreement to avoid war. For Luxemburg, war was not a matter of politics but a matter of political economy. She started stressing the relationship between capital and military industry as well as the necessity of explaining it to the masses so that they would not be deceived by imperial lies. She was in a campaign, so to speak, to elucidate what imperialism was and that a war would be in their bosses' favor.⁴⁴ In the first days of 1913, Luxemburg's book making exactly this point was published.

In all those subjects, the right- and left-wing positions were distinguished in the way they analyzed capitalism itself. The revisionists and reformists thought it was no longer necessary to change the mode of production. They thought that humanity had achieved such a point of productivity that the world needed mere adjustments regarding the split of the social product. On the other hand, the leftists saw the relationship between colonialism, militarism, tariffs, arms race and so

peace and the class character fell behind it. See Karl Kautsky: *Weltpolitik, Weltkrieg und Sozialdemokratie*, 12.7.2020. Online: <https://www.marxists.org/deutsch/archiv/kautsky/1911/08/flugmarok.htm>.

43 See Eduard Bernstein speech in the party congress of 1911, in Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitagés...*, 1911, p. 239; and Hugo Haase's (1863–1919) speech in the party congress of 1912, in Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitagés der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands abgehalten zu Jena vom 17. bis 23. September 1912*, pp. 403–415, 12.7.2020. Online: <http://library.fes.de/parteitage/pdf/pt-jahr/pt-1912.pdf>.

44 See Rosa Luxemburg: *Friedensutopien*, in: Rosa Luxemburg: *Gesammelte Werke*, Berlin, vol. 2, 1981, pp. 491–504; Rosa Luxemburg: *Kleinbürgerliche oder proletarische Weltpolitik?* in Rosa Luxemburg: *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3, Berlin 1980, pp. 26–31.

on in a world system in a specific context. Following Marx's analysis, the leftists saw the moment of greatness they were living as a moment that would be followed by a big depression. To change the way things worked and to provide a better, long and sustainable life to the workers, socialism was necessary. As Clara Zetkin (1857–1933) said at the congress of 1899: »For sure the Factory Acts protect the workers at some point, but the crucial point, the dependence, is not eliminated, their labor power still stays a commodity and is subordinated to the laws of capitalist commodities production.«⁴⁵

Luxemburg wrote a book to explain the relationships between all those themes, capitalist development, and the role of the modern state in it. In a way, she brings back some party resolutions and transforms them into a systematic and rationalized theory to comprehend their global context, as was demonstrated here. Her intentions are clearly considering her historical context: push the party's leadership to a more radical practice to avoid a slaughter of the working class. When Luxemburg intertwines all these elements and the modern state, she argues against the reformists, the right and central wing of the party, that it is impossible to conciliate with the German state or to make concessions to militarism because the German state and militarism were essentially a capitalist instrument and the method in the class struggle. Therefore, *The Accumulation of Capital* summarizes the development of Rosa Luxemburg's thought during 15 years of debates and political practice in the SPD. Some ideas in her book had appeared in party discussions before. Nevertheless, the party leaders abandoned those ideas, and this drove Luxemburg to write and warn the party about the intimate relation between barbarism and the accumulation of capital, stressing that this system could not be reformed

45 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitag... 1899, p. 179, 9.7.2020. Online: <http://library.fes.de/parteitage/pdf/pt-jahr/pt-1899.pdf>.

but rather needed to be overcome by socialism through a revolution by the working class as a whole.

It is true that the idea of »socialism or barbarism« appeared in written form only in the pamphlet »The Crisis of German Social Democracy« of 1915, but it appears as a result of Luxemburg's political activism and her debates within German social democracy from before the war and the disillusion caused by the outbreak of war. When analyzing the development of Luxemburg's thought, the context of the age of empires and the disputes inside the SPD, it seems clear that barbarism was gradually positioning itself as a non-spoken matter that imposed its presence all the time, in particular in the 1910s. When analyzing capital's historical development, Luxemburg drew a conclusion that barbarism is part of this development and the only thing that could make it recede was a workers' revolution. That is the final message of her book. In 1915, the workers had endured war and were gladly going to their own slaughter, so barbarism had won that battle. That is why the pamphlet »The Crisis of German Social Democracy« has such a melancholic tone. However, she did see a way out even in 1915, as she wrote, »we are not lost, and we will be victorious if we have not unlearned how to learn.«⁴⁶

46 Rosa Luxemburg: The Junius Pamphlet. The Crisis of German Social Democracy (1915). Online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/index.htm>. My position stays in between Michael Löwy and Norma Geras. Geras makes Luxemburg into a person that has never changed her thought, while Löwy defends a complete transformation after the outbreak of the war. As it is true that the war changed her enormously, I found in my research that the perspective of barbarism had appeared before war, when she was analyzing the transformations in the party and the gap between organization and mass movement.

Conclusion in a Present Perspective

When I started this research in 2013, I intended to debate with the theories that called Luxemburg fatalistic or an underconsumptionist. But then I found the SPD congress protocols and I could look closely through the debates she was involved in and how that, somehow, led her to write an economic theory.

This introduced me to the development of social democracy from a socialist movement to a conciliatory one. It is also impossible not to compare SPD's path with the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil, observing each one's time and space. Of course, Brazil and Germany are very different countries. Brazil is a former colony, an agricultural exporter country, the eighth largest economy in the world, a country formed by peoples coming from Africa, Europe, and hundreds of indigenous peoples, with an area of 8,516,000 km². Germany is a colonizer and industrialized country, the fourth largest economy in the world, with an area of 357,386 km². Even with such substantial differences, the German and Brazilian parties seem to have a similar development. As Hobsbawm said, »The first, which must warm the cockles of all old red hearts, is the national rise, since its foundation in 1980, of the Worker's Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores or PT) in Brazil, whose leader and presidential candidate ›Lula‹ (Luis Inácio da Silva) is probably the only industrial worker at the head of any Labour Party anywhere. It is a late example of a classic mass socialist Labour Party and movement, such as emerged in Europe before 1914.«⁴⁷ Both parties followed the path from revolution to conciliation. In the German SPD before 1914, Luxemburg fought against its bureaucracy and for its radicalization when the time came in 1905, but the majority took the organization in another direction, the way of order. In Brazil, it is impossible to say we were on the cusp of a revolution; rather, Brazil was nowhere near that (but was Germany anywhere near one at that

47 Eric Hobsbawm: *Interesting Times*, London 2002, p. 382.

time? Certainly there were more radicals in the streets, in a leftist way). In a country with a past permeated by slavery and in a subdued position in the world, the improvements PT achieved for the poorest were enough to make the middle and upper-middle classes lose their temper when facing budget shortages. When the time came, PT did not choose the side of the workers, but rather chose the side of order.

Much like the SPD, but with a different history, PT has transformed itself into a »party of Order.«⁴⁸ However, the historian Lincoln Secco says that the PT, »[o]n the theoretical level, defined itself as against European Social Democracy and ›Soviet bureaucracy‹, but kept its distance from criticisms against Cuba«.⁴⁹

Rosa Luxemburg's debates in the SPD show that it is impossible for the working class to bargain with elites. It must stand up and face them. Instruments such as credit or the army serve to reproduce this society, and socialists must revolutionize society, create a new one. Like the right wing of the SPD, PT also thought it was possible to make arrangements in the capital order so everyone could live satisfactorily. History has once again proved that it is not. I am not saying that the policies applied by the Workers' Party in Brazil were unimportant, but they were not enough without a stronger movement from bottom to top. The bottom-top movement existed in both cases, SPD and PT, but in both cases it was not stimulated towards a radicalization in times of intense class struggle. Both parties centralized themselves more and more as the years passed, but the SPD was the first political party model and it is a model to this day. What is a Leninist party if not the mirror of a social democratic one? In Brazil, the Workers' Party started differently from probably any other in history as a Luxemburgist party in a way, pooling together a lot of bottom movements in Brazilian society of the 1980s. But time has passed and

48 Karl Marx: *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Moscow 1972.

49 Lincoln Secco: *História do PT*, Cotia 2011, p. 74

the party became centralized with a large amount of bureaucracy, engulfing the local organizations that almost do not exist anymore.⁵⁰

Rosa Luxemburg's analysis of capital accumulation still stands. All three methods stressed by her still have a major role in capital mobilization and they are still organized through the state, although there is a major ideological speech that says that the state does not play a role nowadays (or that it should not). The fact is that, without the state, capitalists could not profit.

Militarism surely continues to be a motor for the capitalist economy. As an example, we could mention the USA's attack against Iran in January 2020 and all their campaigns since the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. Loans still make peripheral countries dependent on central ones and submit them to international demands such as pay squeezes and other austerity policies in crisis periods. Brazil is a great example of that since it has been struggling with such policies since independence. Protectionism still means high tariffs in the center and no tariffs in the periphery, though today, commercial policies are not limited to these taxes. In Brazil, for example, there are almost no taxes to avoid the transfer of profits, which attracts foreign investments since businesses can easily send money back to their mother companies.

Brazil has a history of colonization and domination that persists until today, so one can say it is still a sort of (neo-)colony. In the beginning, Brazil's territory was colonized by Portugal; then, the imperial state that formed after independence was submitted to English interests. Later, the country was transformed into the backyard and supporter of US interests in Latin America. Now the country, like the whole world, finds itself in the middle of a fight for hegemony between China and the United States. But some states have more

50 See Rosa Gomes: *Com Classe sem Classismo na Batalha que não Foi*, in: Lincoln Secco (Ed.): *A Ideia. Lula e o Sentido do Brasil Contemporâneo*, São Paulo 2018; Secco: *História do PT*.

ways to protect themselves than others. That was made clear by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis when central countries, mainly the US, intervened in negotiations to practically rob equipment and medical materials from less fortunate countries. This demonstrates that the world lives in a kind of barbarism instead of the virus enlightening us about humanism.

All in all, history has proved Rosa Luxemburg was right in many aspects. From a peripheral perspective, which was also Luxemburg's, her economic thought and current events lead to the conclusion that underdeveloped countries will never be developed, because development under capitalism is an illusion from the point of view of human necessities. The international division of labor and class society defines capitalism. Peripheral countries and peoples are not exotic or living the childhood steps of the evolution that will bring them to a superior level of life. They are on the same step as the central countries, but the ruling classes need the periphery to live in worse conditions, at the edge of or living in barbarity. Socialism or barbarism is a political economic motto that is very present nowadays, especially in the world's peripheries. It is never too much to say »workers of the world, unite!«, but for real.

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