

Reform or revolution?

By Bill Kilpatrick

In honour of International Women's Day that was celebrated on March 8, I want to take a look at the life of Rosa Luxemburg, the early twentieth century Polish socialist revolutionary. Given that there is a rapist and misogynist running the wealthiest country in the world who is implementing not only economic policies from the 19th century, mainly those of President William McKinley, but trying to revive the social conditions from the late 19th century as well, it just seems fitting. They say that everything that is old is new again and Luxemburg and many of her ideas are enjoying a revival at the moment.

Luxemburg was an astounding woman by any measure and has been called the 'most brilliant intellect of all the scientific heirs of Marx and Engels' and the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy says that she 'is one of the most original and influential thinkers in the history of Marxism. Her life and works stand out for the unique combination of intellectual rigor and political integrity, a rare ability to merge deep theoretical insight with sharp political vision, the development of knowledge which is at the same time militant activism.'

Born in 1871 in Zamo?? Poland Luxemburg had a lot of social barriers to overcome and learned early on what oppression and inequality were. She was an intellectual woman at a time when it was still men who dominated universities, she was also disabled, Polish, and Jewish living in Russian dominated Poland. Her intellectual acumen earned her a place at a prestigious school in Warsaw where she 'rebelled against the oppressive atmosphere in the school, and developed an interest in the activities of the various illegal revolutionary groups agitating against both capitalist oppression and the despotic character of Russian rule. By the time she finished secondary school in 1887, her 'rebellious attitude towards authorities' was already mentioned in official school reports.' They say we behaved women seldom make history, this was not a problem for Luxemburg.

She moved to Switzerland in the 1890s where she completed her doctorate and then moved to Berlin in 1898 where she embroiled herself in what was known at the time at the 'revisionist' controversy in socialist thought. It was here that she penned one of her most famous works *Reform or Revolution* where she critiqued the ideas of another socialist writer, Eduard Bernstein, who, according to Mary-Alice Waters, was attempting to 'refute the basic tenets of scientific socialism. Particularly the Marxist assertion that capitalism contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction.' Waters added that Bernstein 'denied the materialist conception of history, the growing acuteness of capitalist contradictions, and the theory of class struggle. He concluded that revolution was not necessary, that socialism could be achieved by gradual reforms of the capitalist system?' Basically Bernstein argued that the German socialist party, the SPD, should 'be transformed from a party of social revolution into a party of social reforms.' What made his critiques so damning was that Bernstein was 'Friedrich Engels's close friend, collaborator and literary executor, as well as a senior figure in the German Social Democratic Party.'

Given that we live at a time when the wealth gap between rich and poor has never been higher, diversity, equity and inclusion are under attack, and the very foundations of democracy are being threatened, perhaps a look into Luxemburg's critiques of capitalism wouldn't be a bad idea.

Let's begin by pointing out that she flatly rejected Bernstein's thesis and believed that his idea of bringing about socialism through reforms was a fruitless endeavour because at its core it continued to allow capitalism to function and the point of socialist revolution was not to revise capitalism, but to replace it with socialism. The fundamental idea of Marxism, says Luxemburg, 'consists of the affirmation that capitalism, as a result of its own inner contradictions, moves towards a point when it will be unbalanced, when it will simply become impossible.'

The internal contradictions that Luxemburg is referring to are many and, according to Marxist theory, they are supposed to lead to crisis and eventually the collapse of capitalism itself. Contradictions such as the competitive nature of capitalism will always lead to over production which causes supply and demand imbalances and hence crisis. The collapse of the auto industry in 2008-2009 is an example. Too many cars, not enough buyers. Other contradictions include, but are not limited to, the exploitation of labour due to

the clash between the capitalist desire for increasing profits and the workers desire for higher wages and the concentration of capital into a few hands, versus the promise that capitalism will provide for all. These, says Marx, cause instability and crisis and as a result the system will eventually crumble under its own contradictions. Marxists have been waiting a long time for the collapse, but every time there is a crisis, the capitalist system has been able to adapt and continue to function.

Luxemburg critiques the ideas of tariffs, a particular capitalist tool that has become popular again under President Donald Trump. Luxemburg says, 'Given the condition of reciprocal dependence in which the various branches of industry find themselves, a protectionist tariff on a commodity necessarily results in raising the cost of production of other commodities inside the country. It therefore impedes industrial development? at present tariffs no longer serve as a means of protecting a developing capitalist section against a more advanced section. They are now the arm used by one national group of capitalists against another group.? In short tariffs were not a good idea in 1898 and they are not a good idea now given how they harm both those who receive the tariff and those who implement them.

When it comes to capitalism and democracy, Luxemburg's insights are particularly relevant. She says, 'In the clash between capitalist development and the interests of the dominant class, the state takes a position alongside of the latter. Its policy, like that of the bourgeoisie, come into conflict with social development. It thus loses more and more its character as a representative of the whole of society and is transformed at the same rate, into a pure class state. 'No absolute and general relation can be constructed between capitalist development and democracy?'

She continued stating, 'The solution is quite simple. In view of the fact that bourgeoisie liberalism has given up its ghost from fear of the growing labour movement and its final aim, we conclude that the socialist labour movement is today the only support for that which is not the goal of the socialist movement ? democracy. 'the fate of democracy is bound with the socialist movement. 'democracy acquires greater chances of survival as the socialist movement becomes sufficiently strong to struggle against the reactionary consequences of world politics and the bourgeois desertion of democracy. He who would strengthen democracy should want to strengthen and not weaken the socialist movement. He who renounces the struggle for socialism renounces both the labour movement and democracy.'

Luxemburg remained a staunch advocate of world revolution and turned against the German socialist party during the First World War, and was eventually jailed for her anti-war view. She continued to fight for democracy and equality right up until the end when in 1919 she and Karl Liebknecht were abducted by a German far right paramilitary group who murdered her and dumped her body into the Landwehr Canal.

As the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy concluded, 'Luxemburg was a fierce champion of women's rights and of the contribution that advocacy for women representation made to socialist emancipation more generally. What she did reject is the kind of tokenistic feminism which limited itself to the suffrage campaign and isolated the question of female emancipation from the critique of capitalism. ' Rosa Luxemburg's ideas are still relevant today because they belong to a tradition of socialist thinking whose main concern is with freedom, its development in the course of global history, the obstacles to its realization, and the different types of oppression that capitalist society entrenches, enables or fails to abolish. ' For her, as for Marx and others before him, human beings have a unique moral authority grounded on freedom which provides the basis for a radical critique of existing capitalist institutions as well as the impetus to struggle for a genuinely free society.' That struggle continues today.