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To cite this article: Peter Hudis (2012) Rosa Luxemburg's Concept of a Post-capitalist Society, Critique, 40:3, 323-335, DOI: [10.1080/00111619.2012.697758](https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2012.697758)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2012.697758>



Published online: 13 Sep 2012.



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Rosa Luxemburg's Concept of a Post-capitalist Society

Peter Hudis

This paper explores Rosa Luxemburg's contribution to the effort to theorize a viable alternative to capitalism. It argues that few figures in the radical tradition had as multidimensional and all-encompassing a vision of a new society, as seen in her famous insistence that there can be no socialism without democracy and no democracy without socialism. At the same time, however, Luxemburg's understanding of a post-capitalist society was constrained by the conception, widespread among the Marxists of her era, that capitalism is defined by market anarchy and socialism is defined by planned, 'socialized' production. This juridical counterposing of 'market anarchy to a 'social planning', it is argued, falls short of Marx's own vision of the transcendence of capitalism. Despite these limitations, however, Luxemburg began to articulate a much more liberatory conception of socialism, rooted in the transformation of alienated conditions of labor, in some of her political writings at the very end of her life, in 1917–1918. The tension in her work between articulating traditional and more radical conceptions of socialism is discussed in the context of confronting the problems associated with formulating a viable alternative to capitalism in our own era.

Keywords: Rosa Luxemburg; Socialism; Post-capitalism; Karl Marx; Market Anarchy; Planned Production

What is a truly socialist society? What must be done for a social revolution to abolish capitalist value production? What does Marx's concept of socialism as the achievement of freely associated relations of production mean for today? We can no longer take these questions for granted. We no longer live in an era when we can assume that opponents of capitalism have the same basic understanding of what constitutes a new society and that the differences between them mainly concern issues of tactics and strategy. The numerous revolutions of the 20th century that nationalized property and curbed the power of the 'free' market but failed to abolish value production and alienated labor call on us to re-examine with new eyes the very content of socialism itself. This cannot be achieved solely through a critique of

capitalism's defects, crucial as that is. To meet the challenge of our times we must explore what *is* socialism as a *philosophical* question.

A critical reading of the work of Rosa Luxemburg can greatly aid this effort. Luxemburg not only developed one of earliest theories of the globalization of capital, but she was also one of the foremost critics of bureaucracy and reformism as well as of statist tendencies *within* the revolutionary Marxist movement. From her polemic against Eduard Bernstein's reformism in 1898 to Karl Kautsky's failure (from 1910) to endorse radical mass action, and from her polemics with Lenin over organizational centralism to her critique of the Russian revolution in 1918, she projected a vision of liberation that in many respects transcended the horizons of 'orthodox Marxism'. Perhaps more than any other dimension of her work, the expansiveness of her vision of freedom and human liberation—central to which is her insistence that there is no democracy without socialism and no socialism without democracy—speaks to us today.

Any effort to explore Luxemburg's concept of a post-capitalist society, however, faces several problems. First, like most Marxists of her historic era, Luxemburg was confident that history would *compel* a new society to arise, making it unnecessary to speculate about the future. Partly for that reason, her work contains no lengthy or systematic discussion of socialism. The reluctance to directly address the content of a socialist society predominated among virtually all of the tendencies of the Second (and Third) International. It was taken for granted that Marx's criticism of the utopian socialists and his strictures against creating 'blueprints about the future' meant that it was pointless, if not counter-productive, to speculate about post-capitalism. It was (wrongly) assumed that, since Marx never directly discussed the forms that would define a socialist society, there was even less reason for his followers to do so.¹ Why risk falling prey to 'utopian' speculations, when the growing concentration and centralization of capital and the socialization of labor were inexorably leading to the formation of a socialist society in any case?

This reluctance to address in any detail the alternative to capitalism persisted even after the revisionism controversy of 1898–1899. Luxemburg brilliantly demolished Bernstein's claim that the growing role of credit in accelerating the centralization of capital meant that capitalism would 'give way' to socialism on its own, by showing that such factors only sharpened the contradictions of capital in a way that made social revolution *more* imperative. The dispute did not, however, touch on how Bernstein (or the other revisionists) conceived of socialism itself; at issue was the *means* by which to reach it.² The same was true of Luxemburg's emphatic break with

¹ Despite these claims, Marx actually had a great deal to say about a post-capitalist society—far more than almost any other 20th century Marxist. I subject these discussions of Marx to critical analysis in my book, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

² Bernstein infamously declared that to him the 'goal' was nothing, and the 'movement' to achieve it everything. However, his revolutionary critics did not respond by contending that the very conception of 'socialism' shared by the revisionists was fundamentally misconceived.

Kautsky in 1910 over his advocacy of a ‘strategy of attrition’ in place of revolutionary action—a break that preceded Lenin’s rupture with Kautsky by four years.

Second, the predominant view in the Second International, and in much of what called itself ‘Marxism’ in the decades that followed, was that capitalism is defined by the ‘anarchy of the market’ and socialism is defined by collective or state control of the means of production. This view also characterized much of Luxemburg’s work. This is especially seen from her *Introduction to Political Economy* and *The Accumulation of Capital*. She wrote in the former that in capitalism there is ‘the disappearance of any kind of authority in economic life, any organization and planning in labor, any kind of connection between the individual members’. She argued, ‘There is indeed, still today, an over-powerful lord that governs working humanity: capital. But its form of government is not despotism but anarchy.’³ This juridical counterpoising of plan vs planlessness as the absolute class opposites falls far short of Marx’s view of socialism as the abolition of value production through ‘freely associated’ labor.⁴

It is not that Luxemburg was unaware of the central importance of production relations and the social form of labor in the Marxian critique of capitalism. She was a studious enough follower of Marx to know that,

But all these aspects of economic life are themselves determined by one decisive factor, production. The fact that the distribution of products and exchange can only be consequent phenomena is apparent at first glance . . . Production itself is therefore the first and most important element in a society’s economic life.⁵

However, if this is the case, then it is not the ‘anarchy’ of the market that is the decisive issue in capitalism, but rather *the despotic plan of capital at the point of production*. The ‘anarchy’ of the market, which is indeed a determining factor in social life, conceals, according to Marx, *the* determining factor—the *forced* character of *alienated* labor. While Luxemburg fully understood, *in general*, the priority of social relations of production over exchange and the market, when it came to her specific enumeration of the dynamics of capitalism she emphasized the ‘anarchic’ character of exchange to the point of contending that there is ‘the disappearance from the [capitalist] economy of any kind of plan or organization.’⁶ Influenced as she was by the prevailing orthodoxy that treated ‘anarchy’ and ‘despotism’ as absolute opposites instead of as mutually reinforcing tendencies, the despotic plan of capital at the point of production dropped out of sight.

³ Rosa Luxemburg, *Einführung in die Nationalökonomie in Gesammelte Werke*, Band 5 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1990), p. 579. This work has until now never appeared in full in English, although it will appear in the next volume of the English-language *Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg*, of which I am General Editor. The volume is entitled *Economic Writings: I* (New York and London: Verso Books, 2013). All quotes from the *Einführung in die Nationalökonomie* are from the translation by David Fernbach, who translated it for the *Complete Works*.

⁴ See Marx’s *Capital*, Vol. I (New York: Penguin Books, 1976 [1867]), p. 173.

⁵ Luxemburg, *Einführung in die Nationalökonomie*, op. cit., p. 644.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 578.

This was not only true of Luxemburg, of course. It was true of the Second International as a whole, and it was recognized as a problem by Engels from its very inception. The 1891 Erfurt Program, which served as the programmatic and theoretic basis of German Social Democracy, referred to ‘The planlessness rooted in the nature of capitalist private production’. In his sharp criticism of the program (written in 1891 but not published until 1901), Engels wrote in response, ‘Capitalist production by *joint-stock companies* is no longer *private* production but production on behalf of many associated people. And when we pass on from joint-stock companies to trusts, which dominate and monopolise whole branches of industry, this puts an end not only to *private production* but also to *planlessness*.⁷ However, that lack of planlessness does not make the society any less capitalistic! Yet despite this, Luxemburg persisted in claiming that ‘anarchy is the life element of the rule of capital.’⁸

Luxemburg’s counterpoising of ‘market anarchy’ (capitalism) to ‘planned production’ (socialism) clearly limited her delineation of the alternative to capitalism. Much of her *Introduction to Political Economy* is devoted to showing that generalized relations of market exchange led to and produced the fragmented, indirect, and exploitative conditions of labor that characterize modern capitalism. The logical conclusion of the analysis suggests that a ‘socialist’ society will arise quasi-automatically from the abolition of ‘market anarchy’—even though she sharply critiqued, in the same work, bourgeois thinkers for only focusing on exchange relations.⁹

Luxemburg was not incorrect, in her *historical* analysis of the rise of capitalism in the West, that capitalist relations of production did indeed arise as the result of the impact of a ‘free’ and ‘anarchic’ market. However, the historical origin of a phenomenon is not the same as its logical determination. Once capitalism becomes predominant, it can persist long after ‘market anarchy’ is overcome—so long, that is, as the despotic plan of capital at the point of production is left intact. Marx himself pointed to this in *Capital*, in noting that even the concentration and centralization of capital in a single hand—which would, of course, mean the

⁷ Friedrich Engels, ‘A Critique of the Draft Programme of 1891’, in *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 27 (New York: International Publishers, 1990 [1891]), p. 224.

⁸ Luxemburg, *Einführung in die Nationalökonomie*, op. cit., p. 587.

⁹ This false counterpoising of ‘market anarchy’ (capitalism) with ‘planned production’ (socialism) is all the more remarkable given Marx’s very clear formulation in *Capital*: ‘All directly social or communal labor on a large scale requires, to a greater or lesser degree, a directing authority, in order to secure the harmonious cooperation of the activities of individuals, and to perform the general functions that have their origin in the motion of the total productive organism, as distinguished from the motion of its separate organs. A single violin player is his own conductor; an orchestra requires a separate one. The work of directing, superintending and adjusting becomes one of the functions of capital from the moment that labor under capital’s control becomes cooperative . . . If capitalist production is thus twofold in content, owing to the twofold nature of the process of production which has to be directed—one the one hand a social labor process for the creation of a product, and on the other hand capital’s process of valorization—in form it is purely despotic’. See Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, op. cit., pp. 448–450.

effective end of an ‘anarchic’ market—would not change by one iota the logic of capital.¹⁰

It is therefore not surprising that Luxemburg, like her contemporaries, did not feel impelled to say much about the content of socialism in such works as the *Introduction to Political Economy*. For she, like her contemporaries in the Second International, largely took it for granted that ‘socialism’ would spring into existence once the ‘free’ market was abolished.

Nonetheless, despite such limitations, Luxemburg went much further than other Marxists of the period by insisting that Marx’s work, especially *Capital*, is best understood not as an analysis of capitalist *development* but as an delineation of its process of *dissolution*. As she put it in the *Introduction to Political Economy*,

If it is the task and object of political economy to explain the laws of the origin, development and spread of the capitalist mode of production, it is an unavoidable consequence that it must as a further consequence also discover the laws of the decline of capitalism, which just like previous economic forms is not of eternal duration, but is simply a transitional phase of history, a rung on the endless ladder of social development. The doctrine of the emergence of capitalism thus logically turns into the doctrine of the decline of capitalism, the science of the mode of production of capital into the scientific foundation of socialism, the theoretical means of the bourgeoisie’s domination into a weapon of the revolutionary class struggle for the liberation of the proletariat.¹¹

Even more important, Luxemburg understood that Marx was able to successfully present capitalism’s tendency towards dissolution and self-destruction because he analyzed it from the the vantage point of a *socialist* future. She wrote in *Reform or Revolution*,

The secret of Marx’s theory of value, of his analysis of money, his theory of capital, his theory of the rate of profit, and consequently of the whole existing economic system is . . . the final goal, socialism. And precisely because, *a priori*, Marx looked at capitalism from the socialist’s viewpoint, that is, from the historical viewpoint, he was enabled to decipher the hieroglyphics of capitalist economy.¹²

She restated this in a review of Marx’s *Theories of Surplus Value* in 1905:

It was Marx who utterly transformed the position *vis a vis* his object of investigation—the position of the socialist, who glances over the *boundaries* of the bourgeois economic form from a higher viewpoint. In short, it was the *dialectic* method of Marx which created the possibility of bringing analysis to bear on the particular problems of economics.¹³

¹⁰ See Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 779: ‘In any branch of industry centralization would reach its extreme limit if all the individual capitals invested there were fused into a single capital. In a given society this limit would be reached only when the entire social capital was united in the hands of either a single capitalist or a single capitalist corporation.’

¹¹ Luxemburg, *Einführung in die Nationalökonomie*, op. cit., p. 587.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 264.

¹³ Rosa Luxemburg, ‘Aus dem literarischen Nachlass von Karl Marx’, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 1, Zweiter Halbband (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1974 [1905]), p. 469.

Although Luxemburg rarely had much to say about the content of a socialist society—aside, that is, from discussing the need to abolish ‘market anarchy’ through ‘planned production’—she nevertheless understood that the inner workings of *existing* society could not be fully unraveled unless they were critiqued from a conceptual standpoint infused with a vision of a socialist *future*. This is part and parcel of the great stress she placed on ideas and consciousness in producing social transformation. In contrast to the vulgar materialism that characterized so many of her contemporaries, she argued that the creation of new social systems and modes of production is never a blind and unconscious process. The ability of the bourgeoisie to throw off the fetters of absolutism, which was so important for the unfolding of capitalism as a global system, could not have occurred, she argued, without such intellectual revolutions as the Enlightenment that preceded it: ‘Political economy, along with the philosophical, social, and natural-rights theories of the age of Enlightenment, was above all a means for acquiring self-consciousness, a formulation of the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie and as such a precondition and impulse for the revolutionary act.’¹⁴ Just as the ‘self-consciousness’ attained by the bourgeoisie classes was a precondition of their ability to gain social dominance over the proletariat, so the self-consciousness and theoretical knowledge of the proletariat will enable it to achieve dominance over the bourgeoisie. Integral to this ‘self-knowledge’ is the need to ‘look at capitalism from the socialist’s viewpoint’. Hence, even if Luxemburg did not issue as detailed or comprehensive a vision of an alternative to capitalism as demanded by today’s realities, she did adequately point to the overall challenge facing us.

Luxemburg’s stress, from her earliest work, on the need to grasp the present from the vantage point of a future new society also informed her understanding of spontaneous mass activity. This took on special importance with her development of the theory of the mass strike during and after the 1905 Russian Revolution. She wrote, ‘Not through formal prohibitions or through discipline, but only by the maximum development of mass action whenever and wherever the situation permits, a mass action which brings into play the broadest masses of the proletariat . . . only in this way can the clinging mists of parliamentary cretinism, of alliances with the middle classes, and the rest of the petty-bourgeois localism be gotten rid of.’¹⁵ As she argued in her 1906 *The Mass Strike, the Party, and the Trade Unions*, this means that organization no longer takes precedence over spontaneity, since ‘revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster to them.’¹⁶ The ‘intellectual sediment’¹⁷ produced by spontaneous struggles is as important as the struggles themselves. Once again, ‘self-consciousness, self-knowledge and class

¹⁴ Luxemburg, *Einführung in die Nationalökonomie*, op. cit., p. 586.

¹⁵ Rosa Luxemburg, ‘Die badische Budgetabstimmung’ [10 August, 1910], in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2, pp. 427–428.

¹⁶ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Party, and the Trade Unions* [1906], in Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (eds), *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, (New York: Monthly Review Books, 2004), p. 198.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

consciousness¹⁸ are viewed as central components of the struggle against capitalist domination.

This conception also informed her polemics with Lenin over the question of organization. She wrote, 'socialist transformation is [not] something for which a ready-made formula lies completed in the pocket of the revolutionary party'.¹⁹ She critiqued Lenin for failing to see that the idea of socialism 'implies a complete reappraisal of our organizational concepts, a completely new concept of centralism, a completely new notion of the mutual relationship between organization and struggle'.²⁰ Luxemburg and Lenin were by no means opposed on all issues, including on organization. In fact, the period of their closest collaboration, 1905–1907, followed her sharp critique of Lenin's 'centralism' in 'Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy'.²¹ At the same time, the extent of her differences with Lenin on this question should not be underestimated. As she wrote in 'Credo', a manuscript of 1911 that has only recently been discovered, 'We felt obliged to stand up decisively against the organizational centralism of Lenin and his friends, because they wanted to secure a revolutionary direction for the proletarian movement by swaddling the party, in a purely mechanistic fashion, with an intellectual dictator from the central party Executive'.²²

Luxemburg's critique addressed more than a tactical issue. It addressed how to avoid reproducing the capitalist division of labor in revolutionary movements by confronting 'the great popular mass with a goal that transcends the whole existing order'.²³ Many radicals have affirmed freedom and democracy as the *goal* of struggle while creating organizations defined by a strict division of labor between workers and intellectuals and theorists and activists. As a result, the hallmark of class society—the division between mental and manual labor—defines their organizational structures. It is therefore no accident that when such groups take power the hierarchical division of labor is left untouched. Luxemburg understood that rigid organizational centralism threatens to reproduce the oppressive social relations of capitalism. As she put it in her critique of Lenin, 'the means turn against the end'.²⁴

Nevertheless, Luxemburg's critique of organizational centralism and praise of spontaneous self-activity co-existed uneasily with the view that socialism is defined

¹⁸ See Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Beginning' [18 November, 1918], in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, op. cit., p. 343.

¹⁹ Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution' [1918], in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, op. cit., p. 305.

²⁰ Rosa Luxemburg, 'Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy' [1904], in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, p. 251.

²¹ One issue that has received insufficient attention in the secondary literature on Luxemburg is the extent to which she practiced highly 'centralist' methods in her work as leader of her Polish party, the SDKPiL. At least in part, the reason for this is that very few of her Polish writings have ever appeared in English; indeed, not all of them have appeared even in German. This will be corrected in the *Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg*, which will contain all of her writings (some 3,000 pages in all) related to and within the Polish socialist movement.

²² Rosa Luxemburg, 'Credo: On the State of Russian Social Democracy' [1911], in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, op. cit., p. 271.

²³ Luxemburg, 'Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy', op. cit. 263.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

by collective or state control of the means of production. As many revolutions since 1917 have shown, state or collective ownership of the means of production by no means negates organizational centralism from above, just as it does not necessarily allow for spontaneous self-activity from below. Luxemburg did not explicitly address this issue, nor is it a surprise that she did not do so, since only after 1917 was she confronted with a successful seizure of power by socialists. Nevertheless, there was an unresolved *tension* between Luxemburg's expansive embrace of spontaneous mass self-activity and her tendency to adhere to the traditional view that socialism is defined by juridical factors like the replacement of private ownership by collective or state ownership. Her emphasis on the full and free expression of mass creativity as inseparable from the goal of socialism appears to be dialectically out of sync with the tendency, often expressed in her economic and historical writings, to pose plan vs planlessness as the absolute class opposites.

In fact, at least in her writings up to 1917, Luxemburg discussed the relation between means and ends relatively rarely. It was far more common for her to focus on the notion of root cause or *causality*. This is especially seen in her *Accumulation of Capital*, which aimed to uncover the *root cause* of imperialism. Her repeated emphasis on presenting the 'root cause' of a phenomenon is also seen in the *Mass Strike* pamphlet, which focused on the relation between economic and political causality: 'Cause and effect here continually change places'.²⁵ Causality is a crucial category, but it is not the *defining* principle of dialectics.²⁶ As Hegel put it in his *Science of Logic*, 'Cause is the highest stage in which the concrete Notion as beginning has an immediate existence in the sphere of necessity; but it is not yet a subject'.²⁷ In other words, discovering the root cause of a phenomenon, while important, does not by itself illuminate the *relation* between the means needed to pursue an end and the content of the end itself. To probe that relation we must go beyond causality by grappling with the subjectivity of self-liberation—the specific nature of the goal itself.

Toward the end of her life, in the short but tumultuous period that spanned from the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 to her death in January 1919,

²⁵ Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Party, and the Trade Unions*, op. cit., p. 195.

²⁶ Although references to 'dialectics' occur often in Luxemburg's work, there is no evidence that she seriously engaged in a study of Hegel's thought, which Marx held was 'the source of all dialectic'. Some have even tried to claim, on the basis of her complaint of the 'dialectical roccoco' of chapter one of Marx's *Capital*, that she was actually hostile to Hegelian dialectics. It is not true, however, that she never read Hegel; she explicitly refers to para. 119 of Hegel's *Smaller Logic* in the course of explaining the concept of contradiction in her *Introduction to Political Economy*. See Luxemburg, *Einführung in die Nationalökonomie*, op. cit., p. 719.

²⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, Vol. II, translated by Johnston and Struthers (New York: Macmillan, 1929 [1817]), p. 472. See also Hegel's discussion in the section on teleology, pp. 377–378: 'Causality according to natural laws is not the only one from which all the phenomena of the world may be derived; it is necessary to assume another causality through freedom in order to explain them'. J.N. Findlay elucidates this passage as follows: 'The origin of the Idea in the notion of teleology throws immense light on Hegel's philosophy. The Idea does not explain things by their cause, or their underlying substance, or the whole of which they are parts; it explains them by being the end towards which they must be thought of as tending'. See J.N. Findlay, *Hegel: A Re-Examination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 253.

Luxemburg's work took on new depth in that she began to project a more expansive view of socialism. This was largely in response to the events in Russia and the German Revolution of 1918. In contrast to the 1905 Russian Revolution, which Luxemburg (like all Marxists) saw as putting bourgeois-democratic demands on the agenda, the Russian and German Revolutions of 1917–1918 raised the perspective of creating a *socialist* society. She therefore began to more directly address the difficult task of envisioning the specific content of a post-capitalist society.

In November 1918 she wrote that making real 'the social order of socialism' is 'a huge work which cannot be completed in the twinkling of an eye by a few decrees from above; it can be born only of the conscious action of the mass of workers'. She added, 'The path of the revolution follows clearly from its ends, its method follow from its task'. On this basis she called for 'All power in the hands of the workers' and soldiers' councils'.²⁸ Shortly thereafter, she issued one of her fullest discussions of a post-capitalist society in an essay entitled 'The Socialization of Society'.²⁹ As always, she focused on the need for the working class 'to get the entire political power of the state into its own hands'. However, she did not stop there. She wrote, 'Political power, however, is for us socialists only a means. The end for which we must use this power is the fundamental transformation of the entire economic relations'. This entails, she said, abolishing private property and transforming it into 'the common property of the people'. However, she now noted that this only 'the *first* duty of a workers' government'. Once collective property replaces private property, 'only then does the real and most difficult task begin: the reconstruction of the economy on a completely new basis'.³⁰

Clearly, by 1918 Luxemburg had moved some distance from the idea that socialism is defined by collective property and a state plan. She now went further by focusing on the need to create a new kind of labor. She wrote that in socialism 'work itself must be organized quite differently' than in capitalism, where 'one only goes to work because one has to, because . . . [it is] the means to live'. In socialism work becomes an end in itself; thus, 'enthusiasm for work must be given the greatest consideration'.³¹

Luxemburg's emphasis on the need to transform the very activity of laboring is remarkable, considering that no one at the time knew of Marx's *Economic–Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in which Marx pinpointed the abolition of alienated labor as the defining feature of truly humanist, post-capitalist society. Marx argued in 1844 that the alienation of the product from the producer, as expressed in the difference between the value of labor power and the value of the total product, is not the central problem of capitalism. The central problem, he argued, is the alienated

²⁸ See Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Beginning' [18 November, 1918], in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, op. cit., p. 343.

²⁹ See Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* (New York: International Publishers, 1933), pp. 29–31 especially.

³⁰ Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Socialization of Society' [December, 1918], in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, op. cit., p. 346.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

character of the very activity of laboring—the fact that labor becomes a mere *means* to an end instead of an end-in-itself. Post-Marx Marxists, however, were not raised on this conception. They generally paid little attention to the alienated character of the activity of laboring, as shown in that even Lenin proposed utilizing ‘Taylorism’—the scientific management of production that characterized Fordist production techniques of developed capitalism—after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Given the lack of access to Marx’s view that changing property forms and market relations amounts to little without an uprooting of the alienated character of work relations themselves, Luxemburg’s stress on how ‘enthusiasm for work must be given the greatest contribution’ is striking.

Throughout the last months of her life she insisted, ‘the proletariat must do more than stake out clearly the aims and direction of the revolution. It must also *personally*, by its own activity, bring socialism step by step into life.’³² As against those who ‘imagined it would be only necessary to overthrow the old government . . . and then to inaugurate socialism by decree’, she wrote: ‘Socialism will not and cannot be created by any government, however socialistic. Socialism must be created by the masses, by every proletarian. Only that is socialism, and only thus can socialism be created.’³³

This perspective also defined Luxemburg’s critique of the Bolsheviks in 1918, the critique of whom she never disowned, despite claims to the contrary.³⁴ Although she supported the Bolshevik Revolution, she sharply critiqued Lenin and Trotsky for treating democracy as a ‘cumbersome mechanism’ to be discarded at will. She fervently opposed the shutting down of opposition newspapers, the banning of leftist political parties and the formation of the secret police, the Cheka—the institution that turned out to become the training ground for so many of Stalin’s later functionaries.³⁵ In her 1918 *The Russian Revolution* she took issue with ‘a dictatorship of the *party*’, calling instead for ‘the most active, unlimited participation of the mass of people, of *unlimited democracy*’.³⁶ This was no idealist illusion on her part. It was a realistic understanding that the capital relation cannot be eliminated from above by even the best leaders or parties, since capital is not simply a material object but the expression of a social relation of domination and alienation.

³² Rosa Luxemburg, ‘What Does the Spartacus League Want?’ [14 December, 1918], in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, op. cit., p. 350.

³³ Rosa Luxemburg, ‘Our Program and the Political Situation’ [31 December, 1918], in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, op. cit., p. 368.

³⁴ Ever since 1922 there has been claims, most famously expressed by Clara Zetkin, that Luxemburg changed her evaluation of the Russian Revolution by the end of her life and decided not to publish *The Russian Revolution*. This was settled two decades ago when previously unknown letters of Luxemburg appeared that made it clear that she did intend to publish it. See Feliks Tych, ‘Drei unbekannte Briefe Rosa Luxemburgs über die Oktoberrevolution’, *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutsche Arbeiterbewegung* 27:3 (1991), pp. 357–366.

³⁵ To give but one of many examples, Vasili Mikhailovich Blokhin, Stalin’s preferred executioner who personally shot and killed at least 7,000 Polish officers at the Katyn Massacre in 1940, and who is often referred to as the most prolific executioner in history, began his ‘career’ in the Cheka, in 1921.

³⁶ Luxemburg, ‘The Russian Revolution’, op. cit., p. 308.

The developments, as well as contradictions, found in Luxemburg's work of 1918–1919³⁷ show themselves most of all in her effort to turn anew to Marx. Just as after the 1905 Revolution she explored Marx's praxis during the 1848 Revolutions, so in 1918 she turned anew to Marx's work. In attacking the programmatic standpoint of German Social Democracy since its founding in her speech to the formation of the German Communist Party in December 1918, she singled out Marx's statement in the 1872 Preface to the *Communist Manifesto* that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes.'³⁸ This represented a departure from Marx's earlier position, articulated in the 1847 edition of the *Manifesto*, that emphasized the need for the proletariat to centralize control over the *existing* institutions of the state.³⁹ Clearly, Luxemburg's projection of the inseparability of socialism and democracy led her to appreciate the importance of previously neglected dimensions of Marx's own work.

Oddly enough, however, Luxemburg did not explicitly refer to Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*, which contained Marx's fullest discussion of a post-capitalist society. In his 1875 *Critique* Marx stated that, even in the first, initial stage of a post-capitalist society that is still 'tainted with the diseases of the old society', there is no value production, no market, and no hierarchical social control of labor.⁴⁰ This was a very different position from that of many Marxists, including Trotsky, who argued that 'the capitalistic measure of value and all the consequences ensuing thereon' also operates in a 'workers' state'.⁴¹

Why did Luxemburg's re-examination of Marx in the last weeks of her life not lead her to revisit his discussion of the phases of a post-capitalist society in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*? Perhaps it was due to lack of time in the hectic period spanning from November 1918 to January 1919. Yet it may also have been that her tendency

³⁷ Specifically, I am referring to the fact that, even though Luxemburg expressed a more expansive view of the new society in many of her *political* writings of 1917–1918, she never retracted or moved away from the more restrictive, juridical conception of socialism found in her *economic* writings. This is reflected in the fact that, although she continued to work on her *Introduction to Political Economy* as late as early 1918, the manuscript does not depart from the narrower conception of socialism critiqued above.

³⁸ Luxemburg, 'Our Program and the Political Situation', op. cit., pp. 357–361.

³⁹ I discuss this issue in greater detail in chapter 5 of Marx's *Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*.

⁴⁰ See Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, op. cit., pp. 29–31 especially.

⁴¹ See Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1945), p. 54. Trotsky even went so far as to argue that 'under Communism not only will bourgeois law survive for a certain time, but also even a bourgeois state without the bourgeoisie' (p. 53). This is very different from Marx's view. Marx held that the greatness of the Paris Commune of 1871 is that it showed that the 'non-state form' of 'freely associated labor' must be the 'lever' for creating communistic, non-exploitative relations of production. See Karl Marx *The Civil War in France* in *Collected Works*, Vol. 22 (New York: International Publishers, 1986), p. 334. When Marx discusses the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, he clearly situates it *prior* to the establishment of either the lower or high phases of communism: 'Between capitalist and communist society lies a period of revolutionary transformation from one to the other. There corresponds also to this a political transition period during which the state can be nothing else than the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat'. See *Critique of the Gotha Program*, pp. 44–45. It goes without saying that Marx never distinguished between a 'socialist' and 'communist' phase of historical development, the two terms being completely identical in his usage; he instead refers to a 'lower' and 'higher' phase of communism (or socialism).

to equate spontaneous mass consciousness with the idea of socialism led her to underestimate the need to explore the conceptual sources to adequately address the content of socialism found in Marx's work. As is well known, Luxemburg rejected the claim that workers could only attain 'trade union consciousness' through their own endeavor; she believed that their spontaneous struggles, in so far as they heighten the class consciousness of the oppressed, could bring them to an understanding of socialism on their own. However, is class consciousness, even at its highest point of development, the same as an understanding of the content of socialism? Is class consciousness the same as socialist consciousness? As the Marxist–Humanist writer Raya Dunayevskaya put it, 'Luxemburg was absolutely right in her emphasis that the Marxist movement was the "first in the history of class society which . . . reckons on the organization and the independent, direct action of the masses"'. However, she is not right in holding that, very nearly automatically, it means so total a conception of socialism that a *philosophy* of Marx's concept of revolution could be left to spontaneous action.⁴²

Luxemburg had a profound understanding of the role of spontaneous struggles in generating a deeper understanding of the nature of socialism, but her assumption that spontaneous mass consciousness *necessarily* or even *automatically* illuminates the content of a new society may have left her ill-prepared to recognize the need to explore the idea of socialism on a *conceptual* basis through a direct study of Marx's writings on the subject. Perhaps this also explains why she refrained from turning directly to philosophy—unlike Lenin, who engaged in a deep study of Hegel's dialectic in 1914–1915.⁴³

Nevertheless, Luxemburg did pose the central problem of *our day*—the need for revolutionary democracy *after* the seizure of power. In doing so she spoke to such questions as: What happens after the revolution? Is it possible to create a new society that does not lead to yet another bureaucracy? Luxemburg may not have 'answered' these questions, and perhaps the confines of her time prevented her from doing so. After all, she did not know of Marx's 1844 *Manuscripts*, which critiqued 'crude communism' in the name of 'positive humanism'. She did not know of the *Grundrisse*, in which Marx spoke of the 'union of free individuals' as the essence of socialism. She also did not know many of the writings of Marx's last decade, in which he projected the possibility that pre-capitalist societies could achieve socialism without undergoing capitalistic industrialization.⁴⁴ Luxemburg's generation, like the 'classical' Marxist tradition as a whole, could not have known that Marx developed

⁴² Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (Champaign–Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 60.

⁴³ For more on this aspect of Lenin's work, see Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel and Western Marxism* (Champaign–Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

⁴⁴ Luxemburg did, however, engage in a serious study of the social forms and communal relations of pre-capitalist societies, and some of her discussion parallels Marx's own studies of these issues at the end of his life. For a comparison of Marx and Luxemburg's writings on pre-capitalism, see Peter Hudis, 'Accumulation, Imperialism, and Pre-Capitalist Formations: Luxemburg and Marx on the non-Western World', *Socialist Studies/Études socialistes*, 6:2 (Fall 2010), pp. 75–91.

a *philosophy* of ‘revolution in permanence’.⁴⁵ Yet we do not have that excuse today. We now have access to the full corpus of Marx’s Marxism. A powerful foundation thus exists for rethinking what *is* socialism as a *philosophical* question. When the legacy of Rosa Luxemburg is explored as part of rethinking what Marx’s legacy means for today, the vibrancy and humanism of her visionary perspective can come to life. We owe history, as well as Luxemburg herself, the attempt to at least make the effort.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of Marx’s thought as a philosophy of ‘revolution in permanence’, see Dunayevskaya’s *Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation, and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution* as well as her *Marxism and Freedom* (Amherst, NY: Humanities Books, 2000) and *Philosophy and Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003).