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The Libertarian Myth of Rosa Luxemburg

Sam Dolgoff

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Without in the least denigrating the heroic dedication to the ideals of socialism, for which she paid with her life, the fact remains that Rosa Luxemburg, was not, as her admirers insist, one of the pioneers of “Libertarian Marxism”. A conscientious reading of her writing will demonstrate that her “libertarianism” actually consists of two mutually exclusive conceptions of socialism which cancel each other out and cannot be reconciled. Her ideas oscillate between a rigid authoritarianism and some libertarian insights – constituting a classic example of Marxist thought on this problem.

In her essay, *Organizational Question of the Social Democracy*, she vividly pinpoints the totalitarian essence of Leninism:

“...Lenin’s thesis that the Central Committee of the Party [not only in Russia but everywhere] should have the right to appoint local committees of the Party and impose its own ready-made rules of conduct...”

On the same page she amply demonstrates that she differs not in essence, but only in degree from Lenin; saying in effect, “you are doing a good job, don’t spoil it by going too far.”

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Rosa Luxemburg explicitly repudiates the fundamental principles of libertarian socialism – socialism, federalism, decentralization, local autonomy – “...it is absolutely essential to safeguard the German labour movement from a lapse into anarchism...” She defends the left wing of the Socialist Party who were “...against a purely parliamentary policy...” from the charge that they were for this reason “anarchizing socialism”. To exclude undesirable elements from the Party, she urged “...greater strictness in the application of centralization and more severe discipline...”

She actually glorified the anti-libertarian character of the German Socialist Party. For Rosa Luxemburg, the Party is the “centre of gravity of the European Labour Movement...the strongest, most model organization of the proletariat...which collected under its banners the most gigantic labour masses...” To support this ridiculous contention she quotes, with unrestrained admiration, her infallible oracle, Frederick Engels: “...the two million voters that the Socialist Party sent to the ballot boxes, and the young girls and women who stand behind them as non-voters...are the most decisive force of the International Socialist Movement...”

In a speech delivered to the founding congress of the Communist Party of Germany, Rosa Luxemburg urged the delegates to adopt the hundred per cent state capitalist (or state socialist) programme outlined by Marx and his echo, Engels, in the *Communist Manifesto* calling for “...the nationalization of credit, the means of communication and transport, the ownership of the factories and the instruments of labour...[and even] the establishment of industrial armies...” insisting that by such measures “...we shall reach socialism...”

Rosa Luxemburg’s undeserved reputation as a “libertarian” rests primarily upon her article, *The Russian Revolution*, in which she severely castigates “...dictatorial tactics...freedom only for supporters of the government...dictatorship over the factories [by the state]...rule by terror...draconic penalties...repression of the soviets...brutalization of public life...attempted assassinations

and shootings of hostages...bureaucracy...Lenin and Trotsky decide everything in favour of dictatorship by a handful of persons...socialism cannot be decreed by proclamation...”

But the glaring contrast between this devastating indictment and her glorification of Lenin, Trotsky, and the role of the Bolshevik Party in the revolution proves conclusively that Rosa Luxemburg is not in any sense of that much abused term, a “libertarian socialist”. She extols “...the party of Lenin...the only one in Russia which grasped the true interest of the Revolution in its first period...seizing the leadership...”

In demanding nationalization and suppression of peasant soviets, she insists that only “...nationalization of the large landed estates can serve as the point of departure for the socialist mode of production on the land...” because, for her, “...turning property rights over to the people or over to the [state] socialist government amounts to the same thing...” She even goes so far as to deny “...the rights of self-determination of the peoples means the disintegration of Russia...” She lambasts Lenin because he proclaimed in *word, but not in deed* the right of various nationalities of the Russian Empire to determine their fate independently, even to the “...point of the right of governmental separation from Russia...”

All the foregoing quotes (and we could easily marshal many more) proves that Rosa Luxemburg was, in fact, an authoritarian statist in the tradition of Marx and Engels, the Socialist Parties, Lenin, and their continuators, the “Marxist-Leninists”.

(All the above quotes are from the anthology, *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1970, Pages 118,128,263, 369–375, 376, 378, 379, 389–393.)

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