Introduction

Rosa Luxemburg indeed counts as one of »the most interesting personalities of the 20th century.«1 The Jewish woman from Poland was not only »a brilliant and luminous individual,«2 whom Franz Mehring (1846–1919) called »the most brilliant follower of Marx,«3 but she was also without any doubt »one of Marxism's most articulate and thorough theorists,«4 although Luxemburg was not a dogmatic Marxist in the negative sense of the term at all. She had a »charismatic personality«5 and seemed to be more politically interested than most of the women and men of her time.6 Her »sparkling mind always sought contradiction,«7 a fact that led the journalist, polemicist, and revolu-

tionary\textsuperscript{8} constantly into confrontation with others who did not share her thoughts, who might even have felt embarrassed by them. Since Luxemburg was neither a pure theorist like Marx nor a party leader like August Bebel (1840–1913) or Vladimir I. Lenin (1870–1924)\textsuperscript{9} but mainly worked as a journalist and lecturer, we can also understand her impact to be one of an »operative intellectual«\textsuperscript{10} who commented on daily events. In her works, nevertheless, Luxemburg also discussed revolution theory and therefore combined revolutionary thinking and revolutionary practice.\textsuperscript{11} All in all, it is therefore no surprise that »the contradictions surrounding Rosa Luxemburg are extreme,«\textsuperscript{12} especially since Luxemburg early on evoked emotions of all kinds as those who met her could not remain indifferent toward her.\textsuperscript{13} Many of Luxemburg’s works also have entered world literature as those of a »brilliant polemicist«\textsuperscript{14} whose talent has remained almost unmatched until today.

Luxemburg, this »fiery woman of Jewish-Polish origin, small and slender, slightly lame from a childhood disease,« as German-British historian Francis L. Carsten (1911–1998) remarked, was »an orator who could sway the masses, a professional revolutionary who seemed to belong to the Russian world from which she came rather

\textsuperscript{13} Piper: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{14} Schütrumpf: Zwischen Liebe und Zorn, p. 26.
than to modern Germany.«\(^{15}\) Luxemburg downplayed mockery about her physique with self-irony, especially since she intellectually over-towered most of those who tried to get to her with comments about her body.\(^{16}\) Her life, nevertheless, was determined by her search for a higher cause, as she wanted to live a politically useful life, a life that would make a difference to those who would follow in her footsteps.\(^{17}\) Although the socialist revolutionary tried to hide most of her private life from the public – her intimate relationship with Paul Levi (1883–1930) was unknown to the wider public before 1983\(^{18}\) –, her life was driven by, as German historian and Luxemburg expert Jörn Schütrumpf worded it, »an insatiable greed for life.«\(^{19}\) She was always looking for the positive things and was »bursting with ideas.«\(^{20}\) In a letter to Sophie Liebknecht (1884–1964) written from prison in early January 1917, Luxemburg emphasizes her love for life beyond her political agitation when she writes: »Nothing human or feminine is alien or indifferent to me.«\(^{21}\) Luxemburg’s life was nevertheless characterized by hardships – not only her four times in prison in 1904, 1906, 1915, and between 1916 and 1918\(^{22}\) – because she, as the late grand dame of Luxemburg research Annelies Laschitza (1934–2018) highlighted, »fought for a better world« that was supposed to »be based on

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16 Schütrumpf: Zwischen Liebe und Zorn, p. 27.
18 Schütrumpf: Zwischen Liebe und Zorn, p. 28.
20 Laschitza: Im Lebensrausch, p. 9. Also see Caysa: Leben als Werk, p. 14.
21 Brief an Sophie Liebknecht, Wronke, Anfang Januar 1917, S. 17–19. 60 hier S. 17
22 Peter Engelhard: Die Ökonomen der SPD. Eine Geschichte sozialdemokratischer Wirtschaftspolitik in 45 Porträts, Bielefeld 2014, p. 27.
unlimited freedom and democracy«\(^{23}\) and therefore became a target of anti-democratic forces.

It is consequently not surprising that Luxemburg sometimes tried to escape into solitude, and her life also had some irascible or melancholic episodes.\(^{24}\) Her works were numerous and dealt with all the important issues of her time: reform and revolution, democracy and dictatorship, nationalism and internationalism, as well as capitalism and socialism.\(^{25}\) Luxemburg discussed the problems of her time, i.e. politics and economic questions alike, and even kept track of the Russian Revolutions in 1917 while she was in prison. Regardless of the diversity of her writings, her »thoughts, actions and hopes were [always] directed towards the proletarian world revolution,«\(^{26}\) and it is not surprising that, over the years, she advanced to become »the most prominent leader of the left wing of the German Social Democratic Party«\(^{27}\) before she left it to act as one of the founding figures of the German Communist Party. Eventually, her murder made Luxemburg »both a heroine and a martyr of the socialist workers’ movement.«\(^{28}\)

While her murder is one aspect of her revolutionary life that »seems to stand out,« Luxemburg’s »disputes with Lenin in which she appears to represent democracy against Russian Communism«\(^{29}\) are another one.

Depictions of Rosa Luxemburg in fiction and biographical works are therefore often based on a selective choice of perspective, depending on the identity and the role the Polish revolutionary was supposed

\(^{23}\) Laschitza: Im Lebensrausch, p. 9.


\(^{25}\) Laschitza: Im Lebensrausch, p. 11.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., p. 568.


to have played due to her life and works.\textsuperscript{30} One major public image of Luxemburg has been based on Margarethe von Trotta’s film \textit{Rosa Luxemburg} (1986), which, however, shows an »introspective woman […] only reluctantly a revolutionary«\textsuperscript{31} and thereby offers nothing more than a somehow distorted view on Luxemburg’s revolutionary life and actions. With regard to the studies about the Polish woman, German social democrat and later communist party member, one can say, in accordance with the French Marxist Emile Bottigelli’s (1910–1975) evaluation, that most of them »are tainted with bias.«\textsuperscript{32} In particular, »Marxist evaluations of Rosa Luxemburg,« as Korean historian Jie-Hyun Lim emphasized, »have ranged from ardent advocacy to excommunication.«\textsuperscript{33} These studies, Lim continues in his evaluation, »have been more ideological than historical, more political than ideological, and, indeed, more sectional than political.«\textsuperscript{34} Jörn Schütrumpf explains with regard to these existent falsifications about Luxemburg, which today sometimes remain unchallenged by the international Left as well, that the political Left has been rather unsuccessful in finding integrative figures, but Luxemburg, Ernesto »Che« Guevara (1928–1967) and Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) could be such figures, as all three of them represent the »unity of word and action« as well


\textsuperscript{31} Scott: Introduction, p. 1.


\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
as »independent thinking.«35 The perversion of socialism in the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century paralyzed the Left, but Luxemburg seems to represent one of those intellectuals who would not have accepted these horrors, especially since she was among the first who criticized the moral corruption of the Russian Revolution by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in October 1917.36 The intellectual Luxemburg, who »pursued equality in freedom and solidarity,«37 however, did not live long enough to fully react to the rise of Leninism, and later Stalinism.

Rosa Luxemburg’s life spanned important events within the time of the German Empire, incuding its fall in 1918, and throughout the years of her activities, she would not only observe but also participate in, and even drive forward, the changes of the decades in question.38 Her texts in which she reacted to the specific contexts of her time,39 however, have not lost their actuality and power with regard to many issues we still struggle with in the 21st century; her thoughts about revolutionary practice in particular are still able to address current events.40 Luxemburg’s texts at the same time possess so much power because they follow a clear dictum instead of seeking a diplomatic approach. Revolution is for Luxemburg a conditio sine qua non, and her critical consciousness embarrassed those German social democrats who had forgotten about the Marxian legacy and the revolutionary

37 Schütrumpf: Zwischen Liebe und Zorn, p. 16.