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Rosa Luxemburg's Global Class Analysis

Marcel van der Linden
International Institute of Social History
mvl@iisg.nl

Abstract

How did Rosa Luxemburg, in her *The Accumulation of Capital* and other writings, analyse the development of the working class and other subordinate classes under capitalism, and how did she view the relationship between these classes and those living in 'natural economic societies'? Following primary sources closely, the present essay reconstructs and evaluates Luxemburg's class analysis of global society. It is shown that Luxemburg pioneered a truly global concept of solidarity from below, including the most oppressed – women and colonised peoples.

Keywords

Rosa Luxemburg – capitalist expansion – natural economy – colonialism – solidarity

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> The notion of a European cultural community is completely alien to the class-conscious proletariat's thought. The cornerstone of Marxist socialism is not European solidarity, but *international* solidarity, encompassing all parts of the globe, all races and peoples.
>
> ROSA LUXEMBURG[1]

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1 Luxemburg 1911b, p. 503.

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Although Marx paid serious attention to the non-capitalist communities of his time (for example, in his studies of the Russian *Obshchina* or the Indian village community), Rosa Luxemburg was the first outstanding Marxist who analysed systematically the *confrontation* between pre-capitalist communities and an invading capitalism.[2] From around 1907 on, while working on her unfinished *Introduction to Political Economy*, Luxemburg authored a variety of manuscripts, including 'Slavery' and 'The Middle Ages'.[3] She examined several economies in the final book-manuscript, such as the Australian Aborigines ('Australian natives'), the Botoró in Brazil, the KhoiSan ('Bushmen') in the Kalahari Desert, the Mincopies in the Andamans and the Inca Empire.[4] Unlike most of her contemporaries, who dismissed these forms of economy as backward, Luxemburg not only pointed out that they were actually extremely flexible and adaptable; she also highlighted how communist ownership of the means of production in them produced 'the most productive labour process in society and the best material guarantee of their continued existence and development' for extended periods. Although she gradually became aware of their inherent contradictions, these types of societies, which had steadfastly withstood the pressure of 'hundreds of years . . . of conquest, domination and exploitation', were only being changed into shapeless 'rubble tips' by their contact with capitalism.[5] Precisely because she, unlike most of the theorists of imperialism of her time, took pre-capitalist societies so seriously, she also considered the *people* who were forced to suffer under the yoke of capitalism. 'For Rosa Luxemburg, "land", "raw materials" or "spheres of capitalist investment" simply do not exist. She sees a globe that is populated, invigorated and cultivated by the most diverse peoples and tribes, who are made into "land", "spheres of capital investment" and "sales markets" by brute force.'[6]

The influence of Luxemburg's ethnographic and historical studies is also clearly evident in her 1913 *magnum opus, The Accumulation of Capital*, as well as in the 'Anti-critique' that she later appended to the text in its

2 For Marx and Engels's ethnological studies, see Krader 1972 and Anderson 2010. This is not to deny, of course, that since their day there have been many Marxists who continued the work of these founding figures. Probably the first of these was Luxemburg's contemporary Heinrich Cunow (1862–1936), the Social-Democratic autodidact who for a few years following the November Revolution ran the Berlin Museum of Ethnography. But his writings were ethnographic in the traditional sense and dealt with pre-capitalist communities only as isolated civilisations. See also Florath 1988.

3 Bundesarchiv Berlin, Nachlass Rosa Luxemburg, NY 4002/16; Ito 2002.

4 Luxemburg 1925, pp. 593ff, 652ff.

5 Luxemburg 1925, p. 688; see Hudis 2006, p. 78.

6 Neusüß 1985, p. 290.

defence. Both works are imbued with respect for cultures and peoples based on natural economies. Naturally, Luxemburg did not hesitate to mercilessly analyse exploitation within pre-capitalist societies. Luxemburg saw the global expansion of capitalism as an extraordinarily powerful process that – if it prevailed and succeeded in capturing the entire world – would perish by itself. However, long before this, the resistance of the proletariat in the capitalist world – as well as of the peoples in the regions that were not yet capitalist – would probably halt its full development. As she put it in her speech at the Paris Congress of the Socialist International in 1900: 'It is becoming more and more likely that the *collapse of the capitalist system* will not occur through an economic crisis, but through a *political* crisis brought about by world politics.'[7]

In the present essay I will follow primary sources closely to reconstruct and evaluate Luxemburg's class analysis of global society. In so doing, her *The Accumulation of Capital* will of course play a major role, but I will consciously read this book in a narrow way. I am not going to deal with the consideration that Luxemburg's central assertion that capitalism constantly requires 'non-capitalist strata and countries' in order to expand, and that consequently this reading may have rendered her take on Marx's *Capital* significantly limited.[8] For me, this simply expresses the empirical observation that the sale of goods produced under capitalist conditions to non-capitalist layers and countries provided a significant contribution to the growth of the system. Conversely, it also expresses how food and raw materials produced under non-capitalist conditions reduced the cost of wage goods and circulating capital in the capitalist parts of the world. The Indian historian Irfan Habib correctly states:

> In exchange for its products, both those that compete with those of non-capitalist economies and others which the non-capitalist sector cannot produce, the capitalist industry itself requires in return products that for technical reasons it cannot produce at all, or can only produce at very high costs. This happens because peasant agriculture often succeeds in producing food crops (wage-goods) and raw materials . . . at lower cost since it can sustain itself with very low returns. Or, again, because climatically certain food crops and raw materials may be produced only where peasant agriculture prevails, as was the case in the nineteenth century with rice, sugar, cotton (outside of the slave plantations of the West Indies and the United States), oilseeds, jute, etc.[9]

7 Luxemburg 1900c, p. 809.

8 Luxemburg 2003, p. 332; Luxemburg 1913f, p. 301.

9 Habib 2003, p. 13.

Regardless of whether Luxemburg's theory of accumulation is correct or not, we cannot write the history of the working class under capitalism without also considering the producers and consumers who were not, or not yet fully, integrated into capitalism. Whether capitalism would have actually collapsed without these non-capitalist producers is another matter.

So now we can get to the crux of the matter: how did Luxemburg, in her *Accumulation of Capital* and other writings, analyse the development of the working class and other subordinate classes under capitalism, and how did she view the relationship between these classes and those living in 'natural economic societies'? Although the literature on Luxemburg is extensive, as far as I know this issue has not yet been systematically dealt with. First I will briefly set out her vision of the major trends of development in the capitalist world and the integration of non-capitalist areas. Then I will turn to her global class-analysis, followed by her analysis of social conflicts and coalitions. Finally, I will offer some further thoughts. Mindful that in the past Luxemburg's thought has often been unjustly simplified, I will often quote her extensively.

Direct and Indirect World-Capitalist Expansion

The Accumulation of Capital represents the culmination of a learning process that unfolded between 1890 and 1913. In her early publications, Luxemburg had already focussed attention on the extremely dynamic, expansive and, indeed, predatory character of capitalism. In 1898 she noted that the world market was becoming 'narrower and narrower' as a result of production growing more quickly than the new markets. This ensured that competition became increasingly unrestrained: not only between capitalists, but also between nation states.[10] 1871 was the year of change. After this date, the hegemonic position of the United Kingdom began to be gradually dismantled. This also entailed a weakening of the dominant role of British industry. At the same time, Germany and the United States were moving up the ranks – 'first-rate powers' which were now competing for 'domination of the world market'.[11]

This intensified international competition continually led to the subjugation and integration of pre-capitalist regions. All non-capitalist countries and peoples were 'torn to shreds, to be gradually digested by capitalism'.[12] Thus it was not only 'capitalist exploitation and oppression' that was being 'carried

10 Luxemburg 1898b, p. 286.

11 Luxemburg 1898c, p. 293.

12 Luxemburg 1911d, p. 28.

to all corners of the earth', but also 'rebellion', leading to 'the revolutionary awakening of the Orient'.[13] Contradictions mount in this 'terminal phase': 'at home between capital and labour, and abroad between capitalist states'.[14]

As early as 1899, Luxemburg showed how ongoing expansion would inevitably run up against limits, as a result of capitalism subjugating the whole world and dividing up all its regions in the foreseeable future. The inevitable consequence would be stagnation, because 'as soon as capitalism has encompassed the entire globe – and this will almost be achieved once and for all with the division of Asia – as soon as the international economic and political contradictions thus reach tipping point, capitalism will be at the end of its tether. As long as its heir, the socialist proletariat, is not mature enough to accept its historical inheritance, then capitalism can only continue to atrophy.'[15] Before it gets to this stage, however, there is constant change in the power relations between different capitalist countries. Driven by competition, capital shifts from one country to the next, constantly transforming the international division of labour in the process.[16] As a result, the political situation becomes extremely unstable.

Britain responded to its loss of power with rapid colonial expansion. In the 1880s it swallowed up Egypt and moved, 'blow by blow', into Central and Southern Africa. In the late 1890s, England waged the Boer War. 'Thus, it was precisely in the past few decades that we saw British imperialism expand to its full size.'[17]

German capitalism was a late developer and only began its journey in the 'formative period' after 1871.[18] It arrived in 'the world with an evil conscience, and the sour mood of a hangover', because 'even in the cradle it was not allowed to dream the innocent dreams of youth'.[19] Making up for lost time in terms of

13 Luxemburg 1912c, p. 149.

14 Luxemburg 1913a, p. 193.

15 Luxemburg 1899d, p. 364. Luxemburg's argument is similar to the explanation offered by Marx in a letter to Engels, dated 8 October 1858: 'The proper task of bourgeois society is the creation of the world market, at least in outline, and of the production based on that market. Since the world is round, the colonisation of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan would seem to have completed this process.' Therefore, in his opinion, 'on the Continent revolution is imminent and will, moreover, instantly assume a socialist character.' (Marx 1983, p. 345.) See the critical commentary on this in Mészáros 1995, p. 35.

16 Luxemburg 1899a, p. 315.

17 Luxemburg 1913e, p. 284; see also Luxemburg 1914b, p. 436.

18 Luxemburg 1912c, p. 149.

19 Luxemburg 1914a, p. 373.

accumulation, the regime concentrated its economic power into huge banks and cartels.[20] The result of this expansionist trend was the Morocco Affair (1911), which saw Germany plunge 'into the limitless dangers of imperialism'.[21]

The *United States* quickly developed 'from an export market for European industry into a capitalist export state' that competed with European capitalism everywhere.[22] On the basis of rapid economic growth, and driven by the desire for further expansion, the United States began to develop into an imperialist power. 'With the conquest of the Philippines, the United States also crossed the threshold and became a world power'.[23]

Where capitalism had not yet fully developed, other powers in addition to the 'big three' also played a role. Despite their relative underdevelopment, they attempted to hold their own in the global power struggle. This is quite clearly the case with *Russia*, a country that combined highly developed industry with extremely backward agriculture. As the government 'coddled' the Moscow business class with 'all kinds of donations and favours', capital was pampered and thus suffered from a 'profit hypertrophy'. It felt 'neither the desire nor the need to expose itself to the harsh weather of the world market and thus was satisfied with ordinary profits'.[24] Therefore it was the state that was the driving force behind expansionism, not business. 'While in most capitalist states, industry – to the extent that the limits of the domestic market become too narrow for it – pushes the government to acquire new export markets through conquest or treaties, in Russia, conversely, the Tsar's policies see industrial exports as a way of making the Asian countries marked for political booty first of all economically dependent on it.'[25] The regime's aspiration is to 'Europeanise Russia *socially* and *economically* in order to *politically* preserve it as an Asiatic state'.[26]

Another important, yet even less-developed power was the *Ottoman Empire*. Here too, large parts of the economy were 'archaic' and doomed to collapse, but at the same time no real capitalism could develop organically from the existing money economy, and the extensive bureaucracy looted the people 'professionally'. Overwhelmingly, attempts at reform had only worsened the situation for the agrarian population. The result was the transformation of rent

20 Luxemburg 1912b, p. 126.
21 Luxemburg 1912b, p. 127.
22 Luxemburg 1898b, p. 286.
23 Luxemburg 1898d, p. 297.
24 Luxemburg 1898a, p. 202.
25 Ibid.
26 Luxemburg 1899b, p. 322.

in kind into rent in money, a random fiscal system and unclear land-tenure relations.[27] The downfall of the multinational state thus became almost unavoidable. With prescient insight, twenty-five years before the establishment of the Turkish republic, Luxemburg wrote: 'The foundations of Turkish despotism are being undermined. Yet the foundations of its development into a modern state are not being laid. It must therefore perish, not as a form of government, not as a state, and not through class struggle, but through the struggle of nationalities. And what this will create is not a regenerated Turkey, but a series of new states, cut from Turkey's womb.'[28] Territorial rivalry – not only amongst the advanced capitalist states, but also with powers that were not yet capitalist – grew under the pressure of these developments. Thus Russia and Britain fought over Persia's 'new booty'.[29]

The Integration of the Non-capitalist Milieu

From the outset, that is to say long before the end of the nineteenth century and throughout its continued expansion, capitalism promoted a struggle against the non-capitalist milieu. This happened first in Europe, with the struggle against feudalism's serfdom economy and guild crafts, then moved outside of Europe against societies that varied in development, from small groups of hunter-gatherers to formations based on small-scale commodity production.[30] Four economic factors drove capitalism's struggle against the natural economies: '1. To gain immediate possession of important sources of productive forces such as land, game in primeval forests, minerals, precious stones and ores, products of exotic flora such as rubber, etc. 2. To "liberate" labour power and to coerce it into service. 3. To introduce a commodity economy. 4. To separate trade and agriculture.'[31]

The Direct Appropriation of the Productive Forces

Trade in commodities took too long to gradually decompose the non-capitalist economies, so the appropriation of the productive forces often occurred through violence, through 'the systematic destruction and annihilation

27 Luxemburg 1896a, p. 60.
28 Luxemburg 1896b, p. 63.
29 Luxemburg 1912b, p. 128.
30 Luxemburg 2003, p. 348; Luxemburg 1913f, p. 316.
31 Luxemburg 2003, pp. 349–50; Luxemburg 1913f, pp. 317–18.

of all the non-capitalist social units.'[32] Thus the Indian 'communist village community', which despite being invaded by the Persians, the Scythians and the Arabs, had endured for thousands of years, was destroyed by the British within a few dozen years.[33] In a similar fashion, from 1830 the French colonialists in Algeria had attempted to 'civilise' the old Arab-Kabyle socio-economic institutions.[34] The destruction of the natural economy went hand in hand with 'the decimation, indeed the extermination, of whole tribes of people. This process has accompanied capitalist development from the discovery of America through to the present day: think of the Spanish in Mexico and Peru in the sixteenth century, the British in North America in the seventeenth century and in Australia in the eighteenth century, the Dutch in the Malay Archipelago, the French in North Africa and Britain in India in the nineteenth century, the Germans in South-West Africa in the twentieth.'[35]

The 'Liberation' of Labour-Power

As it expands across the globe, capital cannot be satisfied with white workers alone. It requires 'unrestricted disposition over the labour-power of the whole globe'. But capital generally encounters these 'non-white' workers in traditional, pre-capitalist production relations, from which they have to be 'freed'. The importance to capital of acquiring necessary labour-power from non-capitalist societies becomes a concrete problem in the form of the so-called labour question in the colonies. A range of 'soft power' techniques are deployed to solve this question, to free labour-power under the command of capital by ending its subordination to other social authorities and conditions of production. In the colonial countries, these attempts result in the strangest hybrids of the modern wage-system and primitive power relations.[36]

The Introduction of the Commodity Economy

Because in all natural forms of production 'production only goes on because both means of production and labour power are bound in one form or another',[37] capital strives to integrate labour-power into the commodity economy. 'Capital requires to buy the products of, and sell its commodities to, all non-capitalist strata and societies.'[38] To this end, railroads, telegraph wires, canals etc. are

32 Luxemburg 2003, p. 350; Luxemburg 1913f, p. 318.
33 Luxemburg 2003, pp. 351–7; Luxemburg 1913f, pp. 319–24.
34 Luxemburg 2003, pp. 357–65; Luxemburg 1913f, pp. 325–333.
35 Luxemburg 1921, pp. 482–3.
36 Luxemburg 2003, pp. 343–4; Luxemburg 1913f, pp. 311–12.
37 Luxemburg 2003, p. 349; Luxemburg 1913f, p. 317.
38 Luxemburg 2003, p. 366; Luxemburg 1913f, p. 334.

built. But how can capital induce non-capitalist peoples to buy its goods? Here too, violence is often used, as exemplified by the Opium Wars which 'opened up' China to trade with British goods.[39]

The Separation of Agriculture from Industry

In natural economies, agriculture and handicraft are intertwined. Capital must destroy this relationship to facilitate its efforts to turn peasant families into consumers of its goods (such as textiles). Its aim is to homogenise factory-produced commodities to serve a large, country-wide market.[40] For Luxemburg, a model was the United States, where even at the beginning of the nineteenth century, small and medium-scale farmers could meet most of their family's needs themselves and thus get by 'almost without money'. However, following the Civil War between 1860 and 1865 this situation changed, and they increasingly felt compelled to purchase food and clothing, etc.[41]

Such a gradual transition from natural economy to capitalism occupies three phases: at first the natural economy is undermined, then a struggle against the (petty) commodity economy takes place, and finally capital becomes dominant.[42] The continuing integration of non-capitalist strata and countries is essential to European capital, as is shown by the development of industry in the 1890s. '[R]aw cotton from the slave states of the American Union' and 'grain (a means of subsistence for the English workers) from the fields of serf-owning Russia'[43] were essential to maintain the production of the British textile industry, as was 'the cotton crisis in England resulting from the disruption to *Plantagenkulturen* by the American war of secession, or the crisis in European canvas weaving by the interruption to the supply of flax from peasant Russia which was a consequence of the war in the East.'[44]

The importance of non-capitalist production is even more significant if we 'recall that imports of corn raised by peasants – i.e. not produced by capitalist methods – played a vital part in the feeding of industrial labour, as an element, that is to say, of variable capital.'[45] Conversely, a considerable

39 Luxemburg 2003, pp. 367–74; Luxemburg 1913f, pp. 335–42. While accepting the possibility that people could want commodities of their own accord and without compulsion, she does not seriously investigate this. See her remark: 'But abroad, where capitalist production has not yet developed, there has come about, voluntarily or by force, a new demand of the non-capitalist strata.' (Luxemburg 2003, p. 407; Luxemburg 1913f, p. 373.)

40 Luxemburg 2003, p. 376; Luxemburg 1913f, p. 343.

41 Luxemburg 2003, pp. 376–89; Luxemburg 1913f, pp. 344–56.

42 Luxemburg 2003, p. 348; Luxemburg 1913f, p. 316.

43 Luxemburg 2003, p. 337; Luxemburg 1913f, p. 306.

44 Luxemburg 2003, pp. 337–8; Luxemburg 1913f, pp. 306–7.

45 Luxemburg 2003, p. 337; Luxemburg 1913f, p. 306.

portion of the British cotton industry's turnover came from the sale of cotton fabrics to 'the peasants of India, America, Africa and so on'. But it is not just consumer goods that are sold to the regions of the world yet to be integrated into the capitalist world – so too are the means of production. Thus, 'in the first half of the nineteenth century', British industry supplied 'materials for the construction of railroads in the American and Australian states'. Likewise, the German chemical industry provided means of production, such as dyes, which were sold *en masse* to countries in Asia, Africa etc. that were not engaged in capitalist production.[46]

Class-Formation and Stratification on a Global Scale

Naturally, Luxemburg considered the capitalists and the workers to be the main classes in the global capitalist system because 'despite being hostile brothers', they were 'actually children of one and the same formation – capitalism'.[47] In Luxemburg's work, the *bourgeoisie* is above all an abstraction, a character-mask whose guise is 'the capitalist class'. Nowhere does she analyse the 'thorny and self-denying existence' of the bourgeoisie and its 'necessary luxuries'.[48] Of course, she pays more attention to the development of the *working class*, since this is after all the first exploited class – unlike the slaves or peasants – that can seize power and open the way to socialism.[49]

As a result of industrialisation in Europe, North America and Australia, as well as the gradual industrialisation of Asia and Africa, the global working class rapidly grew in size.[50] But the wage workers do not form a homogenous mass, they consist of many layers. In her later works, Luxemburg distinguishes between a 'top layer of better-off industrial workers', a 'layer of unskilled agricultural proletarians constantly streaming from the country into the town', 'semi-rural irregular occupations, such as brick manufacturing and work on the land', and the 'broad lower strata of the reserve army'.[51]

While capital accumulation increases the size of the working class, other factors (whether they are directly or indirectly associated with such accumulation) have an opposite effect. World War I brought about the '*mass*

46 Luxemburg 2003, pp. 332–3; Luxemburg 1913f, pp. 301–2.
47 Luxemburg 1895–6, p. 49.
48 Luxemburg 1921, p. 423.
49 Luxemburg 1906c, p. 44.
50 Luxemburg 1906c, p. 42.
51 Luxemburg 1925, pp. 764–5.

destruction of the European proletariat. Never before had a war wiped out entire social classes of people. . . . Millions of human lives . . . were destroyed, millions were crippled. But of these millions of people, nine-tenths were working people from the town and country.'[52] It was precisely this vanguard of the international proletariat in the most highly developed countries that was decimated; World War I thus turned out to be 'not simply a grand murder, but also the suicide of the European working class.'[53]

During these processes of growth and contraction, the composition of the working class constantly changed. Technological change tended to simplify labour and thus render it *less skilled*. One indication of this was the proliferation of female and youth labour as a result of the 'displacement of skilled workers by unskilled workers'.[54] But this trend also became visible in other ways. Thus the transition from sailing to steam-ships saw the traditionally fearless and daring sailors give way to 'average workers'.[55]

In its hunt for cheaper labour, capital constantly tries, over and over again, to replace sections of the working class by others that can produce more cheaply. Thus, in 1900 Luxemburg wrote, 'lately, a new form of capitalist exploitation is being tried – *jail and workhouse labour* – such as in the production of baskets and cigars, for example.'

This clearly created downward pressure on wages.[56] With '*modern domestic industry* capital has invented a clever way for proletarian children to be exploited by their proletarian parents.'[57] And a heap of misery lies behind ostensible *self-employment*. It is highly likely that 'the income gained from such "self-employment" is less than the average wage, while the precariousness of such an existence is often greater than that of a wage worker'. The 'independent trader', whether they employ an assistant or not, is thus a 'natural ally in the class struggle'.[58]

But, unlike most other Marxist theorists of her time, Luxemburg also factored in the position of working women. Female domestic labour may indeed be 'a gigantic accomplishment of self-sacrifice and effort', but for capitalism it is 'mere air'. This is because, 'as long as the domination of capital and the wage system lasts – only work that creates surplus value and generates capitalist

52 Luxemburg 1916a, p. 162.
53 Luxemburg 1916a, p. 163.
54 Luxemburg 1898c, p. 292.
55 Luxemburg 1899c, p. 350.
56 Luxemburg 1899e, p. 595.
57 Luxemburg 1913c, p. 221.
58 Luxemburg 1898e, p. 310.

profit is considered to be productive.' From this point of view, 'the dancer in the music hall, whose boss pockets profit generated by her legs, is a productive worker, whereas all the toil of the wives and mothers of the proletariat within the four walls of home is considered to be unproductive activity.'[59]

Luxemburg situated the development of the bourgeoisie and the working class against the much broader backdrop of global social relations. In general terms, her analysis of the behaviour of the classes in a world context can be summarised as follows (Figure 1):

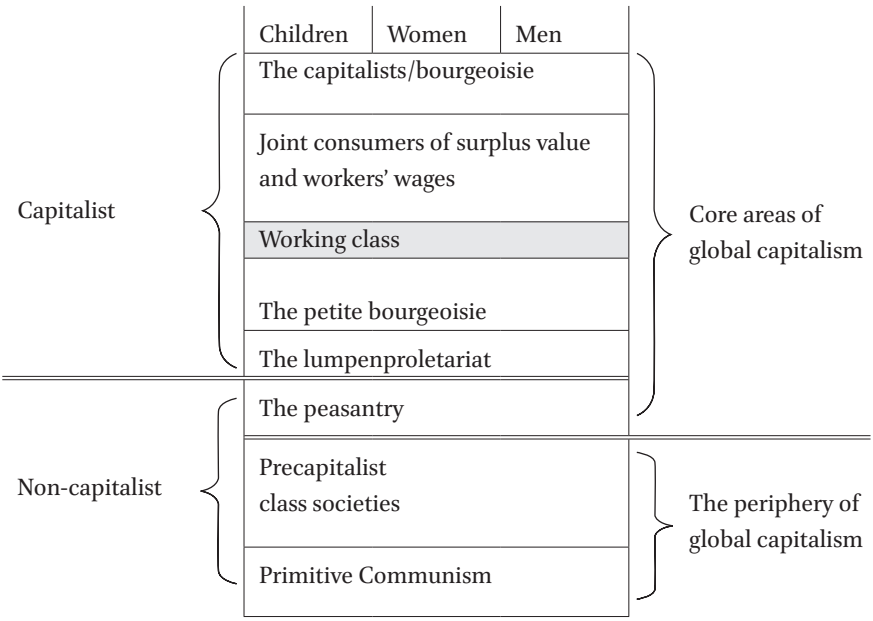

FIGURE 1 *Luxemburg's view of the global class structure in the early twentieth century.*

In the parts of the world dominated by capitalism, many classes or layers emerge, of which a considerable section has not yet been integrated into capitalism, particularly the peasantry. In the non-capitalist parts of the world, there exist both primitive-communist and pre-capitalist societies, the latter with their distinctive contradictions between the ruling and the labouring classes (slaves, serfs etc.). Luxemburg did not devote equal attention to these different classes and layers.

59 Luxemburg 1912d, p. 163.

Joint Consumers of Surplus Value and Workers' Wages

Alongside the capitalists and the workers, there is also 'a host of other people: the landowners, the salaried employees, the liberal professions such as doctors, lawyers, artists and scientists. Moreover, there is the Church and its servants, the Clergy, and finally the State with its officials and armed forces.'[60] All these groups live at the expense of the two main classes: the landowners are 'consumers of rent, i.e. of part of the surplus value'; the liberal professions were reconciled to the consumption of 'bits' of surplus value; the clergy partly derives its income from surplus value and partly 'from the workers, i.e. from wages'; officers and armed forces are maintained by rates and taxes, which are 'levied upon either the surplus value or the wages.'[61]

The *petite bourgeoisie*, in the long run threatened by capitalism's tendency to concentration, assumed an 'intermediate position' between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie; the proletariat is the leading element and the petite bourgeoisie its 'incidental appendage'.[62] The petite bourgeoisie is politically unreliable, it sways 'towards one direction, only to then sway towards the other'. In the 1907 Reichstag election they made 'common cause' with the bourgeoisie, but in other situations they supported the workers' movement.[63]

Luxemburg characterised the *lumpenproletariat* in extremely negative terms. So it is that, in 1906, she spoke of a counter-revolutionary layer 'which stands below the proletariat, the layer of propertyless social parasites, such as prostitutes, professional criminals, all kinds of dark and accidental existences.'[64] In 1910, she refers to the lumpenproletariat as 'thieves', 'bandits' and 'thugs'.[65] In a text that remained unpublished during her lifetime, 'On the Russian Revolution', she wrote: 'The lumpenproletarian element has a deep adherence to bourgeois society . . . as a social waste that grows particularly at times when the walls of the social order are collapsing.'[66]

When it came to social relations in pre-capitalist class societies, Luxemburg introduced a distinction between situations in which trade had no significant influence on social life and those where it did. Thus she says that: 'As long as the slaves were needed in the home, slavery still had a patriarchal, mild character.'

60 Luxemburg 2003, p. 106; Luxemburg 1913f, p. 104.

61 Luxemburg 2003, p. 107, also pp. 274, 328; Luxemburg 1913f, pp. 105, 249, 297; and Luxemburg 1921, p. 426.

62 Luxemburg 1900–1, p. 64.

63 Luxemburg 1907a, p. 192.

64 Luxemburg 1906b, p. 34.

65 Luxemburg 1910, p. 470.

66 Luxemburg 1918, p. 361, footnote.

Only with the growing influence of trade, when slaves were forced to produce commodities for the market, did 'inhuman drudgery begin for the slaves'.[67] A similar change occurs in bondage relations, which initially had been relations of guardianship: 'when the nobility became acquainted with the comforts of money, payments and duties for the purposes of trade were increased more and more, the bondage relation became serfdom, the peasant was oppressed to the extreme.'[68] Primitive communism, which had a vestigial existence in Algeria, India etc., and in which kinship ties play a major role, is 'the general typical form of human society at a certain level of human development' and its very existence punctures 'the old idea of the eternity of private property'.[69] Its existence was a danger for the bourgeoisie, because it established a connection between the 'stubborn resistance' of the colonial 'natives' on the one hand, and 'the new gospel of the revolutionary impatient energy of the proletarian masses in the old capitalist countries.'[70]

Coalitions and Struggles

Global capital conducts a constant struggle, not only between its different constituent parts for raw materials and export regions, but also against the global working class and non-capitalist layers and peoples. This struggle is ruthless and, where necessary, extremely violent. Following the Franco-German war of 1870–1, there was no armed conflict in Europe for forty years. But, as Luxemburg wrote in 1911, this in no way meant that capitalism had become peace-loving. On the contrary, Europe could only avoid war 'because European issues and interests are now being fought out on the ocean, not in the European backwater.'[71] The sham peace in Europe would soon be over. Three years before the outbreak of World War I, she noted: 'Today, the flames of war lick the shores of Europe, a conflagration threatens to erupt.'[72] Ironically, the expansion of imperialism that had previously facilitated the peaceful period in Europe was at the same time the development that threatened a new explosion. As she noted in the 'Anti-critique': 'the circle of development begins to close – the decisive battles fought out in those areas that were the arenas of

67 Luxemburg 1925, p. 725.
68 Luxemburg 1925, pp. 725–6.
69 Luxemburg 1925, p. 604.
70 Luxemburg 1925, p. 613; cf. Löwy 1968.
71 Luxemburg 1911b, p. 501.
72 Luxemburg 1911e, p. 58.

expansion rebound against the countries that started them. Imperialism thus re-repatriates catastrophe from the periphery of capitalist development back to its starting point.'[73]

And when war broke out again, her view was that this was not simply a European or North Atlantic war, but a conflict that also affected the global South. The numerous colonies were drawn into the general conflict by the attempt of 'every belligerent state' to 'occupy the enemy's colonies or at least to initiate an uprising' there.[74] Thus Germany's enemies 'incited negroes, Sikhs and Maoris to war' – people who 'in today's war' almost play 'the same role as the socialist proletarians in the European states'.[75]

Capitalist expansion engendered horrific massacres. A revolting example of German colonial barbarism was General von Trotha's mass murder of the Hereros, in what is now Namibia, between 1904 and 1905. Luxemburg frequently returns to this outrage, but she does so most extensively in a 1911 speech:

> The Herero are a Negro people that has for centuries sat on soil that it fertilised with its own sweat. Their 'crime' was that they did not submissively hand over their homeland to the predatory knights of industry and white slave-holders, that they defended this homeland against foreign invaders. In this war also, German weapons covered themselves in glory aplenty. Mister von Trotha issued the famous command: 'every negro who turns out to be armed will be shot' – no quarter would be given. The men were shot, women and children were driven in their hundreds into the burning desert, and in the murderous Omaheke the wreath of their seared bones fades – a glorious wreath to German arms![76]

Because capital expands by force and strives to destroy the natural economies, the 'primitive societies' have no choice other than 'opposition and fight to the finish – complete exhaustion and extinction'.[77] But more advanced societies defend themselves too, as it turned out in the revolutions in Persia (1906), in Turkey (1908) and China (1911), and in the revolutionary ferment in India, Egypt, Arabia, Morocco and Mexico.[78] For Luxemburg, the Chinese revolution had above all an emblematic significance, as this country had been a model of

73 Luxemburg 1921, pp. 520–1.
74 Luxemburg 1918, p. 361, footnote.
75 Luxemburg 1916a, p. 109.
76 Luxemburg 1911c, p. 537.
77 Luxemburg 2003, p. 351; Luxemburg 1913f, p. 319.
78 Luxemburg 1911a, p. 496.

peace and political stability for so long. Luxemburg spoke of a 'global turning point'.[79] 'Did you not grow up with the idea that the great Chinese empire, that pigtailed colossus in the East, is an exception to all historical laws, that it is a country where all the storms of history break at its frontiers?'[80] An even more special place was Russia in the revolution of 1905 to 1907, because it already signalled 'the period of transition from capitalist to socialist society'.[81]

Under these circumstances, working-class internationalism assumes two forms: solidarity with the rebellious people from societies characterised by natural economies and working-class solidarity across national borders. The time when workers thought they were able to avoid global politics and economics is over. 'Today every male and female worker has to say to themselves that nothing happens in global politics which does not have an impact on their own interests. When the negroes in Africa are suppressed by German soldiers, when in the Balkans the Serbians and Bulgarians murder Turkish soldiers and peasants, when in the Canadian elections the Conservative Party suddenly gains the upper hand and smashes the dominance of the Liberals, in all these cases male and female workers have to say to themselves that this is about their cause, that their interests are at stake.'[82] As for solidarity with people living in the non-capitalist world, as far back as 1899 Luxemburg noted that: 'With colonial policy . . . the working class finally condemned *in principle* the violent domination of foreign countries and nations.' Luxemburg consistently supported with great dedication the campaigns against the imperialist interventions in West Africa, Morocco, China, etc.[83]

Also, she was clear that directly material considerations meant that the mutual solidarity of workers themselves dictated that struggle could not accept state borders. The economic dependence of workers in one country on the workers of other countries manifested itself at an early stage, and already found expression in the international trade-union action in favour of worker-safety measures.[84] But above and beyond this there are also more general political interests that hang in the balance. 'Socialism is an international endeavour' that connects the workers 'of various countries and various parts of the globe' and points 'towards their task: the abolition of capitalism.'[85] However, this

79 Luxemburg 1911f, p. 81.
80 Luxemburg 1912b, p. 128.
81 Luxemburg 1906a, pp. 9–10.
82 Luxemburg 1913b, pp. 212–13.
83 For example, Luxemburg 1900b, pp. 801–2.
84 Luxemburg 1900c, p. 807.
85 Luxemburg 1906c, p. 49.

international solidarity confronts at least two fundamental problems. The political struggle can only be conducted within the bounds of national states, because in their daily struggle, workers in different countries cannot form a common political party, but have to organise themselves separately in each state.[86] In addition to this, the balance of power between the classes constantly changes within and between countries. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the level of development of proletarianisation influences the workers' consciousness and capacity for organisation. It turned out, for example, 'that the craft character of the work force, even if it is, on the one hand, a great obstacle to enlightenment in the sense of the modern class movement, has on the other hand the certain advantage of facilitating organisation.'[87] Secondly, the internal stratification of the working class is significant. Only 'the upper layer of the better-off workers' can be organised in trade unions.

And finally, the layers of the reserve army, i.e. 'the unemployed facing irregular employment, domestic industry, and the casually-employed poor' completely elude organisation. In general it can be said: 'The greater the hardship amongst and strain on a layer of the proletariat, the less scope there is for trade unions to influence them.'[88] In addition to this there is the problem that trade-union actions reinforce differentiation amongst the proletariat, because they 'raise out of poverty the upper vanguard of the industrial proletariat capable of organising, condensing and consolidating them. Thus the distance between the upper and lower layers of the working class becomes greater.'[89]

Trade-union organisation is only accessible to the 'upper layer of better-off industrial workers'. Generally, the 'lower layer of unskilled agricultural proletarians constantly streaming from the country into the town', as well as the 'semi-rural irregular occupations, such as brick manufacturing and work on the land', and 'the broad lower strata of the reserve army', are outside of the unions.

Thirdly, the relationship between workers and other subaltern classes influences the balance of forces. In 1907, Luxemburg noted that, in Germany, 'ever more numerous layers of not only the rural proletariat but also of small farmers are thronging to social democracy.' This proved how 'when it is said that the peasantry is a class of uniformly reactionary petit bourgeois throughout, then to some extent this is dry and lifeless schematism'.[90] During

86 Ibid.

87 Luxemburg 1900a, p. 706.

88 Luxemburg 1925, pp. 764–5.

89 Luxemburg 1925, p. 765.

90 Luxemburg 1907b, p. 228.

the first Russian revolution too, the peasantry was 'an objectively revolutionary factor'.[91] On the other hand, a few years later she predicted that in post-WWI Russia: 'Both social classes – the petite bourgeoisie and the peasantry – who today are following the proletariat, will overwhelmingly stab it in the back to some extent, supported by the lumpenproletariat.'[92]

Fourthly, the level of the workers' movement does not necessarily rise with the development of capital accumulation. The German workers' movement, for example, is more advanced than the British movement. While the former grew big and powerful, the latter was 'impotently' paralysed between the poles of 'socialist sects' and 'reformist working-class politics'. Ferdinand Lassalle was to be thanked for the German head-start, because 'his caesarean section severed the working class from the bourgeoisie once and for all'.[93]

Finally, the power of the workers' movement also depended on its country's position in the world system: Britain's then-current decline is described as of the utmost importance for the labour movement in Britain, just as once was its undivided rule over world trade. As the forms of trade evolve, the British bourgeoisie gradually refines its methods of struggle against the working class. Some very important recent straws in the wind show that in Britain 'the harmony of capital and labour' is being damned and a 'new page in the history of the class struggle is beginning'. The strike that ended in defeat and the lockout of mechanical engineers from 1897–8 was a sign of things to come.[94]

Through combined and uneven development, the ruling class sometimes succeed in actively or passively making good use of the working class. 'No war is possible without the responsibility of the mass of people, be this through warlike enthusiasm or at least through submissive tolerance.'[95] If it is badly led, and if it 'stubbornly avoids an intensification of the class struggle', a mass proletarian party can foster this apathy.[96] Such pacification can be of some worth to the radical left in solidarity and anti-war campaigns. Of course, the ultimate aim is the social revolution; but it is important that we do not

91 Luxemburg 1907b, p. 229.

92 Luxemburg 1917, p. 280.

93 With this note, Luxemburg creates the impression that individuals make history. A few pages later, however, she qualifies this impression: 'German Social Democracy would have come into being with or without Lassalle. Yet the fact that the German proletarian class party already appeared at the gates with such radiance and splendour 50 years ago, more than two decades before all other countries, and acted as a role model for them, is thanks to Lassalle's life work and his maxim: "I dared!".' (Luxemburg 1913c, p. 220.)

94 Luxemburg 1898c, p. 293.

95 Luxemburg 1916b, p. 207.

96 Luxemburg 1913d, p. 230.

understand this to mean 'pitchforks and bloodshed': 'A revolution can also proceed in cultural forms, and if one revolution had a prospect of doing so then it is precisely the proletarian revolution; because we are the last people who resort to violent means, who could wish for a brutal revolution. But such things do not depend on us, but on our opponents.'[97]

In Conclusion

In the first decades after Marx's death, when Marxists spoke of international solidarity they were almost always referring to solidarity between workers, and mainly their vision was limited to Europe and North America. Rosa Luxemburg was the first Marxist who tried to develop a *truly* global concept of solidarity from below, with particular attention to the most oppressed – women. The fact that this attempt was incomplete, and that subsequently, with the benefit of hindsight, we can assess many things much better, reduces her merits only marginally.

A. While Marx and her Marxist contemporaries tended to assess the destructive and violent aspects of capitalist expansion in an ambivalent fashion, Luxemburg placed more emphasis on the purely negative aspects of this development: the misery of many men, women and children who were uprooted and had become its victims. For her, primitive accumulation was not a stage that preceded actual capitalist development (as Marx said in the wake of Adam Smith's thoughts on *previous accumulation*), but a process that endured throughout the entire history of capitalism. 'At the time of primitive accumulation, i.e. at the end of the Middle Ages, when the history of capitalism in Europe began, and right into the nineteenth century, dispossessing the peasants in England and on the Continent was the most striking weapon in the large-scale transformation of means of production and labour power into capital. Yet capital in power performs the same task even today, and on an even more important scale – by modern colonial policy. It is an illusion to hope that capitalism will ever be content with the means of production which it can acquire by way of commodity exchange.'[98]

B. Luxemburg's great empathy for the lot of the oppressed and exploited occasionally means that she contradicts herself. This is very clear in the case of the lumpenproletariat. We have seen how, fully in line with Marx, she considered these substrata to be a kind of historical waste-product. But as

97 Luxemburg 1899e, p. 571.

98 Luxemburg 2003, p. 350; Luxemburg 1913f, p. 318; cf. Bush 2005, pp. 99–100.

soon as she describes specific examples of the lumpenproletariat, the tone changes. One example is an essay on a homeless shelter in Berlin in 1912. There she states:

> The workers themselves, especially the better-off, the organised, like to believe that, all in all, the proletariat's existence and struggle occurs within the limits of decency and decorum. Was 'immiseration' not shown to be nothing but grey theory a long time ago? Everyone knows that there are shelters, beggars, prostitutes, secret police, criminals and 'nocturnal elements'. But all that is generally seen as something distant and foreign. . . . A wall stands between the righteous workforce and those outcasts. One rarely thinks of the misery that grovels in dirt on the other side of the wall.[99]
>
> And no worker is . . . safeguarded from the shelter. If today he is vigorous, honest, hardworking – what will become of him tomorrow if he is sacked because he has reached the fatal limit of forty years of age, a point at which the boss declares him to be 'useless'? What if tomorrow he suffers an accident that cripples him and turns him into an old beggar?[100]

And in her unfinished *Introduction to Political Economy*, Luxemburg noted: 'Every industrial worker who is crippled at work, or has the misfortune of turning sixty, has a one-in-two chance of descending into the lower layer of bitter poverty, into the "Lazarus layer" of the proletariat.'[101]

C. Luxemburg assumed that the incorporation of the strata that were not yet capitalist would lead to the total destruction of the old socio-economic structures. Indeed, non-capitalist relations could continue to exist as hybrid components under capitalism. How exactly this could happen was extensively discussed by anthropologists in the 1960s and '70s, including in the debate on the articulation of modes of production.[102] This notwithstanding, to this day the mechanisms illuminated by Luxemburg continue to be useful building-blocks for the theory of capitalist incorporation.[103]

D. Luxemburg not only considered the working class as the revolutionary subject of capitalist society in the strict sense, but other groups too. 'In the

99 Luxemburg 1912a, p. 86.
100 Luxemburg 1912a, p. 87.
101 Luxemburg 1925, p. 765.
102 See the overview in Foster-Carter 1978.
103 Bodemann and Allahar 1980.

first instance, the proletariat consists of wage earners as the exploited and oppressed class *sans phrase*; but it also consists of layers of the population with an economically ambiguous character, such as the petite bourgeoisie and the small peasants who, insofar as they have proletarian interests opposed to their exploiters and class domination of the state, can certainly be involved in the agitation of social democracy'.[104] At the same time, in her theoretical analysis she excluded from the revolutionary subject groups that according to more recent studies of underdeveloped capitalism were not always counterrevolutionary at all. This is especially true of the lumpenproletariat.[105]

E. Luxemburg stressed that the task of the working class is to act in solidarity with the anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggles of the people in the natural economies, but she understands this solidarity to be a one-sided activity. It never occurred to her to directly establish contact with those who took part in the Herero uprising. In this respect she was following what was the generally accepted behaviour: 'Even Bebel expressed his satisfaction in the Reichstag about the fact that he had never been "tempted" to inform himself directly on the spot regarding the colonies. There were no Social-Democratic correspondents in the colonies, and until 1912 no systematic collecting and evaluation of information. Africans and Social Democrats remained strangers.'[106]

Rosa Luxemburg clarified the outer limits of the Marxism of her time by taking seriously the subjugation and resistance of 'natural economic societies', by analytically linking it to the exploitation and struggle of the working class under capitalism. Not until the first years after the Russian Revolution were further steps made.

Translated from the German by Benjamin Lewis

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104 Luxemburg 1902b, p. 255.

105 Bovenkerk 1984; Buzzard 1987.

106 Mergner 2005, p. 47.

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