Socialist "Radicalism": Rosa Luxemburg's "Social Reform or Revolution?" (1899)

Abstract

Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) was born into a middle-class Jewish family in Russian Poland. Her defense of Marxism, "Social Reform or Revolution?," was written in 1899. Luxemburg opposed Eduard Bernstein's reformist position and criticized the revisionist theories expressed in his 1899 treatise *The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy* [*Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie*]. She went on to lead the Socialist radicals' eventual break with the more reformist Social Democrats. Luxemburg was murdered in 1919 while leading the communist Spartacus revolution in Berlin.

Source

Foreword

The title of the present work may be surprising at first glance: social reform or revolution? Can Social Democracy possibly be against social reform? Or can it counter social revolution, the radical change of the existing order, which is its final goal, with social reform? Certainly not. In fact, the daily practical struggle for social reforms, for the amelioration of the condition of the working people within the framework of current conditions, and for democratic institutions, represents for Social Democracy the only way of leading the proletarian class warfare and working towards the end goal: the seizing of political power and the abolition of the wage system. For Social Democracy, there is an inseparable link between social reform and social revolution, in that the struggle for social reform is the *means*, but radical social change is the *goal*.

We find the counterposing of these two aspects of the workers' movement for the *first* time in the theory of *Ed. Bernstein*, as laid out in his essays "The Problems of Socialism" in *Neue Zeit* in 1896-97 and especially in his book *The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy*. This entire theory essentially amounts to nothing other than the advice to give up radical social change, the final goal of Social Democracy, and instead to transform social reform from a means of class struggle into its goal. Bernstein himself formulated his views most aptly and most sharply when he wrote: "The final goal, whatever it may be, is nothing to me; the movement everything."

But since the final socialist goal is the only decisive aspect that distinguished the social democratic movement from bourgeois democracy and bourgeois radicalism, which transforms the entire workers' movement from a futile effort to repair the capitalist order into class warfare *against* this order, for the abolition of this order, the question "Social reform or revolution?" in the Bernsteinean sense poses for Social Democracy at the same time the question: "To be or not to be?" In the final analysis, the quarrel with Bernstein and his supporters is not about this or that method of the struggle, about this or that *tactic*, but about the very *existence* of the social democratic movement.

This realization is doubly important for the workers, because this is precisely about them and their influence in the movement, because it is their own lives that are being put at risk here. The opportunistic current in the party, whose theory has been formulated by Bernstein, is nothing other than an unconscious effort to secure the upper hand for the petty bourgeois elements that have joined the party, to reshape the practice and the goals of the party in their spirit. The question about social reform and

revolution, about the final goal of the movement is, from a different perspective, the question *about the petty bourgeois or proletarian character of the workers' movement.*

Source: Rosa Luxemburg, "Sozialreform oder Revolution", *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (1899). In Rosa Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1, 1893–1905. Berlin: Dietz, 1990, pp. 369–71.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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