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Think Another Time: Rosa Luxemburg and the Concept of History

ABSTRACT

This essay considers the significance of Rosa Luxemburg's thought in relation to discourses on the materialist conception of history. Luxemburg engaged extensively with Marx's method in order to understand the consequences of capitalism and socialism as a concrete possibility. In *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), she deals with the problem of economic reproduction and the material conditions for the global expansion of capital. Yet, her writings have sparked a long tradition of debate concerning her contribution to Marxist theory. Within this tradition, Michael Löwy and Norman Geras have discussed Luxemburg's idea of history, giving divergent interpretations of her influential phrase, 'socialism or barbarism.' Building on the key terms of their argument, this essay proposes to read *The Accumulation of Capital* as compelling reflection on the contingency of capitalism. Luxemburg's analysis of the drive to accumulation shows capitalism's manipulation of the process of social transmission and urges a re-appropriation of history against capitalism's teleology of perpetual expansion.

Keywords: Rosa Luxemburg, historical materialism, accumulation of capital, Marxist theories of history, economic reproduction

In a recent essay titled ‘Woman on the Verge of Revolution,’ Jacqueline Rose writes that ‘if Rosa Luxemburg has become a heroine for our times, it is also because her revolutionary moment, spawned in those first decades of the twentieth century, now echoes with our own.’¹ Written after the 2011 uprising in North Africa and the Middle East, Rose’s remarks testify to the fact that almost a century after her death, Rosa Luxemburg is perceived as a part of the present, a heroine *for our times*. The act of declaring ‘Red Rosa’ our contemporary, however, not only involves reflecting on the currency of her legacy. It is not just a matter of showing the relevance, say, of Luxemburg’s thoughts on mass strike in an age of global social movements of protest. As Hannah Arendt wrote in her 1966 essay, thinking Rosa Luxemburg in the present means to challenge the perception of ‘Red Rosa’ as a mere ‘symbol of nostalgia for the good old times;’² it means asking a crucial question: ‘will history look different if seen through the prism of her life and work?’³ The question, in other words, does not concern how best to update Luxemburg for the twenty-first century, but how to rethink the meaning of our times through the transmission of her life and legacy. Rosa Luxemburg is not just heritage for nostalgic recollection or a usable past that can be subject to adaptation. Her thought needs to become a ‘prism’ through which the present can be radically reinterpreted.⁴

For this reason, addressing Rosa Luxemburg as a heroine for our times entails reimagining the meaning of history, the relation between past and present and, most importantly, the ways in which the past can be transmitted into the present. It means, as Arendt explains, not treating history ‘as the inevitable background of a famous person’s life span’ but rather ‘as though the colourless light of historical time were forced through and refracted by the prism of a great character so that in the resulting spectrum a complete unity of life and world is achieved.’⁵ Arendt’s image of the prism suggests that revisiting the past can radically change the way the present is being seen. And it should be noted that Luxemburg wrote compelling meditations on the problem of history and the meaning of transmitting the past as a tool to critique the present. Not only did she examine these problems in her ‘Junius Pamphlet,’ written a century ago at the beginning of World War I. She also provided inspiring reflections on historical time in her masterpiece, *The Accumulation of Capital*, by applying Marx’s dialectical method to understanding capitalism’s historical conditions. This essay will explore how the very concepts of history and historical transmission can be thought otherwise, starting from Luxemburg’s ‘Junius Pamphlet’ and proceeding to interrogate the tradition of debate to which this pamphlet has given rise. My reflections will conclude by contributing to these debates through a reading of *The Accumulation of Capital*. Rosa Luxemburg’s concept of history, indeed, needs to be linked to a conscious intervention aimed at reclaiming historical transmission from capital’s manipulations of time. Reassessing the relevance of Rosa Luxemburg for our times involves addressing the political and theoretical implications of thinking the concept of history through her writings.

1. The Question of History

Luxemburg examined the concept of history in what is known as the ‘Junius Pamphlet,’ an essay titled ‘The Crisis in the German Social Democracy’ (1915), written while in prison for her opposition to World War I. The pamphlet expresses her disappointment at the capitulation of the German Social Democratic Party through its vote in favour of the war in 1914. The Party, at the time the largest socialist organisation worldwide, betrayed the principle of international class solidarity advocated by the Second International by choosing to defend the German ‘fatherland.’ As Mary-Alice Waters notes, ‘August 4, 1914, has long been recognised as one of the most ignominious dates in the history of the international socialist movement.’⁶ This historical circumstance urged Luxemburg to reflect on the meaning of the events within the historical course of the early twentieth century. In her essay, Luxemburg writes that men ‘do not make history according to their own free will. But they make history nonetheless,’ paraphrasing an influential passage of Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.⁷ The action of the oppressed classes is ‘dependent upon the degree of maturity in social development. However, social development is not independent of the proletariat but is equally its driving force and cause, its effect and consequence.’⁸ Luxemburg pointed out that historical events cannot be solely explained by objective laws because they are the products of human action and consciousness. Hence the working class carries a special historical responsibility: objective conditions can and need to be changed by the action and consciousness of the proletariat; in 1915, this meant to reinstate class solidarity and to prevent the descent into the imperialist war. Luxemburg claims that ‘social development’ is, at the same time, cause and effect, driving force and consequence, of the action of the working class.⁹ As Georg Lukacs remarks, Rosa Luxemburg grasped that the proletariat is ‘then, at one and the same time the product of the permanent crisis in capitalism and the instrument of those tendencies which drive capitalism towards crisis . . . But the class consciousness of the proletariat . . . does not advance according to mechanical “laws”.’¹⁰

In order to understand fully the conceptual issue opened through these remarks, Luxemburg’s thoughts need to be linked to their source. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx revealed the problematic link between agency and historical determination by stating that ‘men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.’¹¹ This suggests that the making of history – that is, agency – cannot be detached from circumstances that are ‘transmitted from the past.’ Human beings are free to intervene and change social reality, but they can only do so from the situation in which they find themselves, which they have not produced of their own. History is in the making through a process of transmission and determination.¹² *The Eighteenth Brumaire* was written in 1852, but already in 1845, in his theses ‘Concerning Feuerbach,’ Marx had started to engage with this problem by exposing the limits of Ludwig Feuerbach’s contemplative materialist philosophy, which sees reality or ‘sensuousness’ as a

mere object of knowledge. In contrast with a contemplative version of materialism, Marx argued that ‘the thing, reality, sensuousness’ should not be seen as a static, passive object, but rather as a sensuous ‘*human activity, practice*’.¹³ Historical materialism shows that even those historical conditions that are transmitted from the past, though not chosen by present generations, are still the product of action, labour and struggle of past generations. The reality that the present inherits from the past was in its turn human creation. Such concept of history stresses that the agency of human beings in history cannot be detached from a process of transmission. In addition, it poses the dilemma of what Eric Hobsbawm calls ‘the fundamental relationship between social being and consciousness.’¹⁴ Can class consciousness change history rather than just mirror it? Are the transmitted historical circumstances primarily an effect or a cause of human action and struggle? Rosa Luxemburg’s engagement with the events of her times led her to propose an intense exploration of these issues.

2. Agency and Determination

Michael Löwy and Norman Geras have focused on ‘The Crisis of German Social Democracy’ and have expressed diverging ideas on the notion of history that animates Luxemburg’s life and theory. It could be argued that Löwy’s and Geras’s standpoints in the debate might represent the two sides of Marx’s influential proposition, agency and determination, as they accentuate different aspects that are both present in Luxemburg’s thought. Michael Löwy emphasises the role of human action by dwelling on the importance of the subjective factor and an ‘open history,’ while Geras insists on objective historical conditions as key motivation for revolutionary intervention. Löwy and Geras centre their debate on the influential motto ‘socialism or barbarism,’ which Luxemburg re-phrased from Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* and further elaborated on in her ‘Junius Pamphlet.’ Commenting on the effects of the involvement of the German Social Democratic party in the war, Luxemburg states that ‘bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism’: ‘regression into barbarism’ means the ‘triumph of imperialism’ and the ‘annihilation of civilisation’ through the world war.¹⁵

Luxemburg’s rephrasing of Engels’s ‘either . . . socialism or . . . barbarism’ has become a battlecry in the socialist tradition. On a first, cursory reading, the phrase can be interpreted as an encouragement to fight against the violence of the imperialist war and to hinder the aggressive logic of capitalism. Yet, the exact meaning of this sentence has been object of intense discussion. One of the most sophisticated essays devoted to this passage is Michael Löwy’s 1971 seminal work ‘Rosa Luxemburg’s Conception of “Socialism or Barbarism”.’¹⁶ In his essay, Löwy provides a thoughtful analysis of Luxemburg’s concept of history, starting from the section from the ‘Junius Pamphlet’ quoted above. The starting point of Löwy’s reflection is the dilemma of whether socialism is ‘the inevitable and necessary product’ of historical development or ‘only a moral choice’.¹⁷ Löwy claims that the ‘Junius Pamphlet’ represented a radical break in Rosa Luxemburg’s life. Before the time of

the 'Junius Pamphlet,' Luxemburg's writings showed traces of the predominant 'fatalist' idea of history that was widespread among the socialist intelligentsia in Germany, the notion that the collapse of capitalism was inevitable and that it would have automatically implied the rise of socialism.

However, Löwy remarks that after the 'catastrophe' of 1914 Rosa Luxemburg became fully aware of the fact that the advent of socialism could not be taken for granted and that it was rather an aim to be achieved through constant struggle and political engagement. Löwy notes that Luxemburg's key insight, in the Junius Pamphlet, is that history is not unilinear and there is no guarantee that socialism will be the outcome of the developments of capitalism.¹⁸ From this point of view, the role of the working class does not consist of a mere acceleration or shortening of a pre-determined historical process. In fact, the oppressed classes must decide the direction of history. Löwy elaborates on the wider theoretical and methodological significance of this radical conceptual break. He tracks Luxemburg's reflection down to Engels's *Anti-Dühring*, more specifically the passage in which Engels writes that 'the productive forces created by the modern capitalist mode of production' and 'the system of distribution of goods established by it' are in a 'crying contradiction' with capitalism itself, to the extent that 'if the whole of modern society is not to perish, a revolution in the mode of production and distribution must take place, a revolution which will put an end to all class distinctions.'¹⁹

Engels emphasised that the conflicts and tensions produced by capitalism demanded a radical change in the system, hence a transition to socialism. But he still portrayed the transition to socialism as an almost automatic, necessary outcome produced by the contradictions of capitalism. In contrast to Engels, Rosa Luxemburg radically re-interpreted the meaning of the alternative between 'socialism and barbarism' in a non-deterministic and non-teleological way. Socialism is not a necessary development of the crisis of capitalism, but an alternative that needs to be realised, with urgency, through political intervention. The significance of this intellectual insight is, according to Löwy, the idea of an 'open history,' in which socialism is a possibility among others.²⁰ He summarises the issue as follows: 'with her famous slogan, *socialism or barbarism*, she [Luxemburg] broke, in the most radical possible way, with all deterministic teleologies, proclaiming the irreducible factor of contingency in the historical process—which makes possible a theory of history that finally acknowledges the role of the "subjective" factor.'²¹

This is a concept of history in which the historical conditions of the present do not predetermine the course of history because history is an open battlefield constantly reshaped by political action. Michael Löwy hence remarks that the slogan 'socialism or barbarism' 'implies a perception of history as an open process, a series of "bifurcations" in which the "subjective factor" of the oppressed – consciousness, organisation, initiative – becomes decisive.'²² The oppressed are not the victim of history, nor are they a mere instrument for the realisation of history's laws. Löwy observes:

It is no longer a matter of waiting for the fruit to ‘ripen’ according to the ‘natural laws’ of economics or history, but of acting before it is too late. Because the other alternative is a sinister danger: barbarism. Rosa Luxemburg does not use this term to refer to an impossible ‘regression’ to a tribal, primitive or ‘savage’ past; for her, it is an eminently modern barbarism.²³

The concept of an ‘open history’ inspired by Luxemburg leads Löwy to propose a ‘Marxism of unpredictability’ based on the view that ‘if history is open, if “the new” is possible, this is because the future is not known in advance; the future is not the ineluctable result of a given historical evolution, the necessary and predictable outcome of the “natural” laws of social transformation.’²⁴ According to Löwy, a concept of ‘open history’ challenges ideas of history as natural, necessary and predictable, and becomes the precondition for political action. The unpredictability of the historical process re-opens the present to a multiplicity of possibilities that can equally take place and hence to the ethical and political dimension of the struggle for social justice.

However, Löwy’s interpretation has been questioned by another important heir of Luxemburg. In his analysis of the problem in *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, Norman Geras also provides insightful reflections on Luxemburg’s concept of history, proposing a critique of Löwy’s perspective. The crux of the debate can be summarised by two open questions: the first concerns whether there is, in fact, a shift in Rosa Luxemburg’s conception before and after 1915, something that Löwy tries to demonstrate and that Geras doubts. The second problem, wider and more urgent for the purpose of this essay, is whether Luxemburg’s concept of history can be really seen as a critique of the idea of historical determinism, as Löwy proposes. Norman Geras argues that Rosa Luxemburg did not reject the concept of history as inevitable and, in a way, pre-determined, but it was precisely for this reason that she was able to pose a challenge to revisionism and to urge conscious political intervention against capitalist imperialism. Geras advances two critical points in relation to Löwy’s analysis. First of all, he objects to the claim that there is a break in Luxemburg’s concept of history after 1915. He writes:

First: not a single one of the formulations and arguments cited by him [Löwy] as evidence of a fatalist temptation in Luxemburg’s thought before 1915 disappears from her writings after that date . . . the socialism-or-barbarism formula sits happily beside the argument that it is in the proletariat’s power ‘to accelerate or to retard’ historical development . . . Further, the theory of inevitable capitalist collapse . . . received extensive theoretical elaboration in *The Accumulation of Capital* in 1913, was vigorously defended against criticism in the *Anti-Critique* in 1915, and was reaffirmed in the *Introduction to Political Economy*.²⁵

Geras argues that there only is one concept of history in Luxemburg, a concept she defended in all of her writings, and which the crisis of 1914 only gave her the occasion to reinstate. There is no ‘fatalist’ temptation in Luxemburg’s early writings because the terms she adopted to describe history remained the same. However, since her earlier writing, Luxemburg’s views seem to pose an unsolvable doubt about her concept of history. In her 1900 essay ‘Reform or Revolution,’ Luxemburg notes that ‘*it is not true that socialism will arise automatically from the daily struggle of the working class.*’²⁶ But this is the case because socialism will be the outcome of two factors: on the one hand, the ‘*growing contradictions of capitalist economy*’ and, on the other hand, ‘a social transformation’ provoked by the consciousness of the ‘*unavoidability of the suppression of these contradictions.*’²⁷ This passage stresses the two sides of Luxemburg’s thought about history. Determination and agency, necessary breakdown and conscious human action are presented as two sides of the same historical process. In her 1900 essay, she affirms that socialism will not emerge automatically. Yet, political involvement is based on the consciousness that the destruction of capitalism through its contradictions is ‘unavoidable.’ Even in her 1906 essay on the mass strike, guided by the imperative of the struggle for emancipation, there are passages suggesting that collective action is not artificially ‘made’ or ‘decided’ but rather ‘it is a historical phenomenon which, at a given moment, results from social conditions with historical inevitability.’²⁸ Luxemburg’s view seems to be that political actions need to occur, as Furio Jesi remarks, at the right time; they should neither be premature nor belated in relation to the historical situation.²⁹ In this context, terms like ‘inevitability’ seem to contradict the idea of openness and unpredictability, hence to support Löwy’s view that, before 1915, Luxemburg’s work shows traces of fatalism and teleology. But Geras’s remarks point to an even more radical suggestion about Luxemburg’s perspective, calling into question the very opposition between the two concepts of history: a pre-1915 ‘fatalist’ concept of the inevitable collapse of capitalism and a post-1915 theory about the openness of history and multiple historical alternatives. According to Geras, these two ideas should not be opposed to each other because they are not in contradiction. Geras writes that the two ideas, ‘the idea of inevitable capitalist collapse’ and ‘the idea of socialism-or-barbarism . . . so far from being contradictory, are not even different. They are *one and the same idea.*’³⁰

The antinomy between fatalism and activism is, for Geras, a substantial misunderstanding of Luxemburg’s concept of history. It is worth noting, anyway, that he criticises Löwy in order to support an idea with which Löwy’s reflections are highly compatible: Luxemburg strongly opposed any passive or opportunist conception that the socialist revolution could have been postponed because it was to come anyway. For Löwy, Luxemburg’s challenge to fatalism depended on her awareness of an ‘open history,’ while for Geras, the antithesis to fatalism is represented by the historical necessity of capitalist breakdown. Geras’s critical gesture is based on a shift: whereas Löwy focuses his attention on the necessity of *socialism*, Geras reframes the discourse on the necessity of *barbarism*. Geras suggests that it is, precisely, the idea that capitalism leads inevitably to modern barbarism – hence an idea of historical determination, even teleology – that compels present generations to

interrupt capitalism's accelerating path towards catastrophe and to save humanity from the impending universal ruin. Geras writes:

For Luxemburg, therefore, what the inevitability of capitalist collapse proves is not the redundancy, but the urgent indispensability, of conscious revolutionary struggle on the part of the working class. It is because of that inevitability, and not despite it, that such a struggle is required . . . The whole breakdown theory gives sense to the slogan 'socialism or barbarism,' distinguishing it from mere rhetoric; it is its meaning and not, as has so often been supposed, its negation.³¹

It is not the idea of historical openness, but rather the historical inevitability of capitalist collapse that makes socialism urgent, hence motivates a politically conscious intervention of the oppressed classes. Geras's perspective suggests that there is nothing contradictory between Luxemburg's economic theory of the inevitable collapse of capitalism and her lifelong political commitment to prompting collective action.³² After the publication of Geras's book, Michael Löwy replied to his criticism. He reiterated his thesis about the watershed in Luxemburg's thought and the contradictory aspects of the concept of history informing her writings. In his reply to Geras, Löwy writes that Luxemburg's assertion that 'socialism is a necessity for historical progress' does not 'remove the contradiction between the formula "socialism or barbarism," which as Geras stresses points to "a genuine doubt," and the thesis that the victory of socialism is inevitable.'³³

According to Löwy, there is an unresolved problem and contradiction in Luxemburg's thought: history seems to be at the same time *inevitable* – necessary, predetermined, teleological – and *open* – contingent, unpredictable, subjective. In his reply to Geras, Löwy continues to approach the problem from the point of view of the unavoidable rise of *socialism* out of capitalism's inner contradictions, rather than the historical inevitability of *barbarism* – that is, the thesis that if capitalism is left to its pure expansionist logic, it can only lead to total destruction. This is a problem, indeed, that cannot be explained away because the alternative between barbarism and socialism was never fully 'solved' by Rosa Luxemburg. Did Rosa Luxemburg think that socialism would be an inevitable consequence of the collapse of capitalism or did she envisage the possibility of socialism as one option only, dependent on social consciousness and action? The problem, as Norman Geras notes, remains how to affiliate Luxemburg's clearly non-fatalist view of history with 'the fact that Luxemburg did sometimes speak of revolutionary political initiatives as the mere accelerators of a unilinear process, of socialist revolution as simply the other face of capitalist collapse, of socialism as a historical necessity or inevitability.'³⁴

Rosa Luxemburg's concept of history needs to be seen as posing the question, once again after Marx: how do human beings change an objective course of history that fully determines them as their material condition of existence? How to keep agency and determination – consciousness and the

social being – together? Löwy's interpretation accentuates the role of human beings as makers of history, while Geras emphasises that historical change can only occur within a situation that has not been chosen but rather transmitted. Both perspectives detect core aspects of Luxemburg's dialectical method; taken together, they articulate and reformulate a central question in historical materialism.³⁵ Löwy and Geras focused on Luxemburg's 'Junius Pamphlet' and the phrase 'socialism or barbarism,' which are key to understanding these issues. However, Luxemburg's contribution to historical materialism does not stop there. In her masterpiece, *The Accumulation of Capital*, she famously proposed the theory that capitalism inevitably leads to total destruction and universal ruin. Yet, she also examined capitalism's historical conditions of existence and, most importantly, capitalism's logic of reproduction. Her remarks on these issues indicate that the capitalist system radically transforms the meaning of historical categories. In particular, capitalism deeply affects the possibilities of agency and the very notion of historical determination. Her critique of this mechanism not only continues Marx's method, but also urges a different historical consciousness based on the re-appropriation of the transmission of the past against capitalism's spiral of perpetual violence and global expansion.

3. Transmission and Reproduction

In *The Accumulation of Capital*, Rosa Luxemburg addresses the mechanism of the reproduction of capitalism, posing the question of how capitalism perpetuates its expansionist logic and the inner contradictions of this process. After reading *The Accumulation of Capital*, the question about historical determination and the 'subjective factor' can be interpreted as concerning how historical capitalism has a bearing on the possibilities of action and the potential for socialism. The historical background out of which humans can create the socialist alternative is not natural or neutral, but already determined by capitalism as system in perpetual expansion. From this point of view, socialism will be not the automatic outcome of capitalism's history; rather, the historical circumstances out of which socialism will (or will not) be created are necessarily determined by the expansion of capitalism. Indeed, capitalism does not only affect production, but also economic reproduction and historical transmission, the way in which human societies perpetuate themselves and create a sense of historical continuity.

The Accumulation of Capital can be read as analysis of how capitalism manipulates the way in which historical transmission occurs, and Luxemburg makes a discovery in this regard: capitalism turns historical transmission into creation of value, that is, the reproduction of capital. She states this issue throughout her book, starting from the very introduction, in which she presents the question of reproduction as her main object of investigation.³⁶ Luxemburg observes that reproduction means 'the continual recurrence of the process of production' and that 'the regular repetition of reproduction is the general *sine qua non* of regular consumption which in its turn has been the precondition of human civilisation in every one of its historical forms.'³⁷ The question of reproduction is the material

precondition for human history, and there can be no reproduction ‘unless certain prerequisites such as tools, raw materials and labour have been established during the preceding period of production.’³⁸ The central problem of *The Accumulation of Capital* concerns how capitalism radically transforms this general fact of reproduction. In this regard, capitalism entails a specificity, which is described as follows:

Reproduction here [in a capitalist society] depends on purely social considerations: only those goods are produced which can with certainty be expected to sell, and not merely to sell, but to sell at the customary profit. Thus profit becomes an end in itself, the decisive factor which determines not only production but also reproduction.³⁹

Capitalism is the first social formation that submits the whole process of reproduction to the law of profit, which means: capitalism regulates production according to the need to create profit (surplus value) and to reinvest this profit in order to make further profit, in an endless, constantly expanding spiral. While in ‘every other economic system known to history, reproduction is determined by the unceasing need of society for consumer goods,’ profit-making (surplus value) is the central determining factor of historical capitalism.⁴⁰ The dilemma between human agency and historical necessity needs to be placed within the expanding logic of accumulation. When capitalism is considered as a whole system affecting and ‘determining’ the individual experience of producers, this logic emerges in all its violence and virulence. Rosa Luxemburg writes:

Under a system of private economy, it is the individual producer who determines the volume of reproduction at his discretion. His main incentive is appropriation of surplus value, indeed an appropriation increasing as rapidly as possible. An accelerated appropriation of surplus value, however, necessitates an increased production of capital to generate this surplus value . . . the capitalist method of production furnishes not only a permanent incentive to reproduction in general, but also a motive for its expansion . . . Expansion becomes in truth a coercive law, an economic condition of existence for the individual capitalist.⁴¹

This passage describes a radical transition: from incentive to appropriation, the logic of accumulation becomes law and necessity, and condition of existence. Reproduction turns into a motive for endless expansion, which becomes the underlying cause of each act of production and appropriation of surplus value. The activation of the spiral of accumulation entails a change in the perception of the overall process of reproduction: from a mere choice or possibility, the expansion of capitalism becomes a ‘necessity’ for the survival of the system, an enclosure from which there is no apparent escape. Luxemburg’s book, however, addresses reproduction in order to demonstrate the inner contradictions of accumulation. She shows that this logic results in inconsistency and that pure

capitalism, that is, a capitalist system considered as existing independently of other economic forms, cannot sustain itself and cannot but result in catastrophe. Luxemburg makes the point that capitalism on its own is incapable of realising the surplus value constantly produced. Pure capitalism cannot find ways to transform accumulated wealth into money that can be reinvested to expand production. This happens because whenever reproduction is 'enlarged,' that is, whenever accumulated capital is reinvested to create new profit, a new demand for the produced commodities needs to be found.⁴² Pure capitalism is founded on a coercive law of enlarged reproduction that cannot subsist without the continued existence of some other social formations: pre- or non-capitalist economies.

The contradiction of capitalism derives from its need for other economic forms in order to reproduce a logic of total expansion that does not tolerate other forms alongside itself. The central theme of *The Accumulation of Capital*, hence, is the reproduction of capitalism as a system, and the unsolvable contradictions to which this form of reproduction gives birth. Luxemburg's main argument concerns the realisation of surplus value and how this realisation is impossible in pure capitalism. However, the methodological part of Luxemburg's work, the section titled 'The Problem of Reproduction,' reveals an historical factor affecting the very existence of capitalist society. Capitalism's drive to expand depends on a precondition: the availability of means of production, tools and materials that can be expended and set to work in order to activate the mechanism of reproduction. This is a prerequisite of human history in general, because every economic form needs a storage of resources accumulated from preceding periods in order to subsist. But Rosa Luxemburg also explores the transformation that the hoarding of resources undergoes in a capitalist society. Means of production are subject to the same coercive law of enlarged reproduction that regulates everything in capitalism: the appropriation and realisation of surplus value. For this reason, tools and materials from preceding historical periods are fully absorbed in the process of the accumulation of capital: they become what Marx called 'constant capital.'⁴³ This transformation shows how capitalism manipulates a universal factor of human existence, the handing down or transmission of material objects from one generation to the next. Luxemburg explains it as follows:

The handling of man-made tools is a fundamental characteristic of human civilisation. The concept of past labour which precedes all new labour and prepares its basis, expresses the nexus between man and nature evolved in the history of civilisation. This is the eternal chain of closely interwoven labouring efforts of human society, the beginnings of which are lost in the grey dawn of the socialisation of mankind, and the termination of which would imply the end of the whole of civilised mankind. Therefore we have to picture all human labour as performed with the help of tools which themselves are already products of antecedent labour.⁴⁴

The important insight presented by Rosa Luxemburg concerns her use of the term ‘past labour’ in order to depict this process of social transmission: past labour expresses the link between man and nature and the essential historical fact that human societies need to inherit material conditions of existence from previous generations in order to survive and to be perpetuated. The very act of historical transmission is grasped by Luxemburg as handling-down of material tools and products of previous labour, resources out of which present generations literally ‘make’ the present, by resuming the productive process. The process of transmission allows Luxemburg to indicate that ‘every new product thus contains not only the new labour whereby it is given its final form, but also past labour which had supplied the materials for it, the instruments of labour and so forth.’⁴⁵ Material historical circumstances that determine the present are products of past labour, or ‘antecedent labour,’ which the present revives and re-produces.

In a capitalist society, this process of handling down and transmission of past labour is reformulated as the making of constant capital. Luxemburg notes that in capitalism, past labour assumes a double aspect: on the one hand it becomes use-value, a concrete means of production that serves the making of commodities. On the other hand, it becomes ‘abstract, general, socially necessary labour and as such creates value . . . this past labour, too, now appears as value, as old value.’⁴⁶ Past labour becomes capital and hence value; it is fully incorporated in the enlarged reproduction of capitalism and submitted to the coercive law of accumulation. The fact that this ‘old value’ or constant capital is in truth the product of labour transmitted from the past is in fact forgotten and erased from the process of the accumulation of capital. This is an insight that Marx had mentioned in the first volume of *Capital*, where he famously described labour as a ‘metabolism’ between humans and nature.⁴⁷ The image of metabolism or ‘digestion’ was partly introduced to explain the fact that, whenever products of labour enter the process of production, they lose their nature as products of human labour and become mere resources, ‘objective factors contributing to living labour.’⁴⁸ Marx explains:

A spinner treats spindles only as a means for spinning, and flax as the material he spins. Of course it is impossible to spin without material and spindles . . . But in the process itself, the fact that they are the products of past labour is as irrelevant as, in the case of the digestive process, the fact that bread is the product of the previous labour of the farmer, the miller and the baker . . . In a successful product, the role played by past labour in mediating its useful properties has been extinguished.⁴⁹

The first point made by Luxemburg in her commentary on Marx’s concept of reproduction involves retrieving the past labour extinguished in constant capital. Luxemburg observes that when ‘we go back to that period of production, when the total fixed capital was first created,’ Marx’s notion of constant capital appears ‘unsatisfactory or incomplete.’⁵⁰ Luxemburg suggests that society ‘possesses transformed labour amounting to more than those parts of fixed capital which are absorbed into the

value of the annual product.’⁵¹ In her comments on the notion of ‘simple reproduction,’ Luxemburg notes that capitalism involves turning past labour into value captured by the logic of accumulation. Luxemburg recovers this elemental aspect, which plays a fundamental role in her attempt to show that capitalist reproduction needs other times, spaces, and social formations in order to persevere and to expand.⁵² In her critique of Marx’s concept of ‘simple reproduction,’ Luxemburg writes:

Under capitalist methods of production past labour of society preserved in the means of production takes the form of capital, and the question of the origin of this past labour which forms the foundation of the reproductive process becomes the question of the genesis of capital. This is . . . writ in letters of blood in modern history.⁵³

Past labour is the foundation of the reproductive process and the ‘genesis of capital,’ a genesis that links reproduction to a wider process of historical transmission of labour that exceeds capitalism and that the latter merely appropriates and distorts. Means of production preserve a storage of past labour that capitalism disguises as constant capital. The sense of historical determination engendered by capitalism is affected by the process of reproduction and its drive to extinguish past labour into the making of constant capital. It is this forgetfulness and this erasure that allows the process of accumulation to appear as a coercive law guiding the entire process, while its genesis in the appropriation of past labour is constantly obliterated. The concept of past labour is mentioned by Luxemburg in order to grasp ‘the social process as perpetually in motion, as a link in the endless chain of events’ and to show that the history of labour exceeds what Marx called ‘simple reproduction’: social labour ‘has no beginning, just as it has no end.’⁵⁴ Luxemburg indicates that economic reproduction is the incessant formation and expansion of capital through the appropriation of resources produced by old value or the hoard of past labour disguised in materials of production. The illusion that capital is the cause and guide of the whole process depends on the constant erasure of traces of past accumulated labour from constant capital and on taking constant capital as the beginning of reproduction. Luxemburg’s critique of capitalism demonstrates that the condition of existence of capitalism is the appropriation and commodification of the human ability to transmit products of labour across generations of producers.

4. Conclusion: The Labour of History

Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of capitalism’s logic of reproduction has two implications for thinking the concept of history. First, it involves the consciousness that capitalism is an historically contingent phenomenon, a system that feeds on exterior material conditions of existence and that, for this reason, is ‘immanently incapable of becoming a universal form of production.’⁵⁵ However, the consciousness of capitalism’s historicity and perishability entails a second implication. Capitalism’s reproduction

depends on the commodification of the products of past labour – tools, resources, materials – and on the erasure of the historical traces of antecedent labour preserved in them. It follows that the possibility of constructing an alternative to capitalism needs to re-appropriate the process of historical transmission that capital disguises as value. The socialist alternative can only begin by repossessing the conditions of transmission of the past into the present. The spiral of reproduction can only be interrupted by keeping the traces of past labour alive, an act that involves thinking history otherwise and assuming the present as product of human action. In this sense, Luxemburg shows that, in a capitalist system, historical determination is the result of appropriation: the material conditions of existence are not transmitted as product of past labour but inserted into the labour-process as constant capital.

A concept of history based on the critique of the logic of reproduction exhibits the need to reclaim material conditions of existence as a continuous history of labour and of struggle. This perspective reveals the deeper meaning of Luxemburg's later remarks that the socialist future will not emerge automatically but can only be created from the 'material conditions that have been built up by past development.'⁵⁶ From this point of view, Luxemburg's emphasis on the problem of reproduction anticipates the idea that socialism 'will not fall as manna from heaven' but it can only take place 'by a long chain of powerful struggles, in which the proletariat . . . will learn to take hold of the rudder of society to become instead of the powerless victim of history, its conscious guide.'⁵⁷ The point does not concern so much whether the subjective or objective factor is primary, but the ability to develop an historical consciousness that places the struggles of the present in contact with the 'long chain' of past struggles and the 'endless chain' of social labour that capital constantly appropriates. The possibility of socialism derives, for Luxemburg, from this other historical time and this different view of history, in which the present inherits past labour and takes it forward, guiding the process of historical transmission and resisting capitalism's manipulations of time.

¹ Jacqueline Rose. *Women in Dark Times*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 31.

² Hannah Arendt. 'Rosa Luxemburg.' In *The Portable Arendt*. Ed. Peter Baehr. London: Penguin, p. 422.

³ *Ibid.* p. 420.

⁴ In an important essay on Luxemburg titled 'Red Dreams and the New Millennium' Eric Bronner notes that 'appropriating her legacy' requires 'more than regurgitating the old slogans and searching for citations from her pamphlets and speeches.' In his valuable attempt to highlight Luxemburg's contemporaneity, Bronner however is not convincing in trying to show that she was a libertarian thinker and 'no slave of Marx.' Luxemburg cannot be detached from the tradition of revolutionary socialism and Marxism. Bronner's essay alongside critiques by Paul LeBlanc, Alan Johnson and David Camfield are collected in Jason Schulman ed. *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013. See also Eric Bronner. *Rosa Luxemburg: A Revolutionary for Our Times*. University Park: Penn State UP, 1997.

⁵ Hannah Arendt. 'Rosa Luxemburg,' p. 419.

⁶ Introductory note to 'The Crisis in the German Social Democracy.' In *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*. Ed. Mary-Alice Waters. Atlanta: Pathfinder, 1970, p. 371.

⁷ Rosa Luxemburg. 'The Crisis in the German Social Democracy.' In *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, p. 387.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ J.P. Nettl, author of a biography of Luxemburg, observes that the concept of 'action' in Luxemburg does not mean individualistic self-liberation, but rather the dialectic and collective development of class consciousness

that gives rise to organised political struggle. See J.P. Nettl. 'The German Social Democratic Party 1890-1914 as a Political Model.' *Past & Present* 30 (1965), pp. 65-95.

¹⁰ Georg Lukacs. *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. London: Merlin, 1971, p. 40.

¹¹ Karl Marx, [1852] *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International, 2008. p. 15. This extract has been extremely influential in twentieth-century debates around structure and agency in historical materialism, especially in the controversy between E.P. Thompson and Louis Althusser. See, in particular, Perry Anderson. *Arguments within English Marxism*. London: Verso, 1980. Alex Callinicos reconsiders these debates in *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory*. Leiden: Brill, 2004, and Ellen Meiksins Wood offers insightful reflections on them in her *Democracy Against Capitalism*. London: Verso, 2016.

¹² Paul Blackledge notes that while 'through this aphorism, [Marx] made a formal solution to the problem of synthesising structure and agency within his theory of history, it did not provide Marxists with a clear guide as to the relative weight which may be ascribed to each of these elements.' *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2006, p. 153.

¹³ Karl Marx, 'Concerning Feuerbach.' In *Early Writings*. Trans. Gregor Benton & Rodney Livingstone. London: Penguin, 1992, p. 421, emphasis in the original.

¹⁴ Eric Hobsbawm. *On History*. London: Abacus, 1998, p. 214.

¹⁵ Rosa Luxemburg. 'The Crisis in the German Social Democracy,' p. 388.

¹⁶ Michael Löwy. 'Rosa Luxemburg's Conception of "Socialism or Barbarism".' Trans. Paul LeBlanc. In *On Changing the World*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2013.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 91.

¹⁸ Michael Löwy. 'Rosa Luxemburg's Conception of "Socialism or Barbarism",' p. 95.

¹⁹ Frederick Engels. *Herr Eugen Duhring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring)*, trans. Emile Burns, New York, International, 1894, p. 179.

²⁰ Michael Löwy. 'Rosa Luxemburg's Conception of "Socialism or Barbarism",' p. 95.

²¹ Michael Löwy. 'Marx's dialectic of progress: Closed or open?' *Socialism and Democracy* 14:1 (2000) p. 39, emphasis in the original.

²² Michael Löwy. 'Rosa Luxemburg and Communism.' *Actuel Marx* 2:48 (2010), p. 7.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Michael Löwy. *Fire Alarm*, trans. Chris Turner, London: Verso, 2005, p. 109.

²⁵ Norman Geras. *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*. London: Verso, 1976, p. 29

²⁶ Rosa Luxemburg. 'Reform or Revolution.' In *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, p. 90, emphasis in the original.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Rosa Luxemburg. 'The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions.' In *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, p. 233.

²⁹ Furio Jesi. *Spartakus. The Symbolism of Revolt*, trans. Alberto Toscano. London: Seagull, 2014.

³⁰ Norman Geras. *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 31, emphasis in the original.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 31-32.

³² Similarly, Paul Sweezy notes that Luxemburg's breakdown theory provided an 'implicit refutation' of revisionism because it showed that the contradictions of capitalism were becoming more and more violent and unbearable, hence it 'provided powerful support for the revolutionary view that capitalism must be overthrown, rather than gradually reformed.' 'Rosa Luxemburg's "The Accumulation of Capital".' *Science & Society* 31.4 (1967), p. 480.

³³ Michael Löwy. 'Rosa Luxemburg: A Re-assessment' *New Left Review* I/101-102 (1977), p. 140.

³⁴ Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 37. This concept of history emerges most vividly in writings such as 'What is Economics?' in which Luxemburg remarks that as the 'common political programme of action for the entire international proletariat, socialism becomes a *historic necessity*, because it is a result of the operation of the very laws of capitalist development.' In *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, p. 357.

³⁵ In his excellent book on Luxemburg, Lelio Basso writes that 'it was thanks to dialectical methods of thinking that Rosa Luxemburg was able to see a socialist future as already existing in the capitalist present; this meant seizing on the contradictory aspects of present reality, which were indissolubly bound together.' *Rosa Luxemburg: A Reappraisal*, trans. Douglas Parmee, London: Deustch, 1975, pp. 17-18.

³⁶ Tadeusz Kowalik shows convincingly that Luxemburg's analysis does not concern, as many critics believe, the explanation of the crises of capitalism or the factor of underconsumption, but rather the key issue of capitalist reproduction 'in its pure form . . . omitting periodic changes of business cycles and crises, which, on the one hand, are the most obvious features of capitalism but, on the other, constitute merely a form of the movement of capitalist production, rather than its core' *Theory of Accumulation and Imperialism*, trans. Jan Toporowski and Hanna Szymborska. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014, p. 41.

³⁷ Rosa Luxemburg. *The Accumulation of Capital*, trans. Agnes Schwarzschild. London: Routledge Classics, 2003, pp. 3-4.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 11 Rosa Luxemburg clarifies that ‘surplus value in our exposition is identical with profit. This is true for production as a whole, which alone is of account in our further observations. For the time being, we shall not deal with the further division of surplus value into its component parts: profit of enterprise, interest, and rent, as this subdivision is immaterial to the problem of reproduction.’ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 11-12

⁴² ‘Capital needs to find a demand that is an *external* source of more money, i.e a demand that does not originate from capital itself, because it is a strict impossibility for the capitalist class as a whole to gain an excess of money receipts over the money injected into the system.’ Riccardo Bellofiore. ‘General Introduction.’ In *Rosa Luxemburg and the Critique of Political Economy*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, p. 10.

⁴³ Marx defined constant capital as ‘the value of all the means of production,’ subdivided ‘in turn into *fixed* capital: machines, instruments of labour, buildings, draught animals, etc.; and *circulating* constant capital: materials of production, such as raw and ancillary materials, semi-finished goods, etc.’ *Capital* vol. 2, trans. David Fernbach, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 472, emphasis in the original.

⁴⁴ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, p. 38.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Karl Marx. *Capital* Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin Classics, 1990, p. 283.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 289.

⁴⁹ Ibid. This is what Marx calls ‘productive consumption,’ a process in which, as Alfred Schmidt observes, the products of past labour are ‘thrown’ into the labour-process and re-awakened by living labour ‘as the results and the conditions of existence of that process.’ *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Verso, 2014, p. 73.

⁵⁰ Rosa Luxemburg. *The Accumulation of Capital*, p. 61.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The appropriation of means of production and materials from non-capitalist societies should not be seen, according to Luxemburg, as ‘incidental’, ‘illustrating merely the genesis of capital’ or what Marx called ‘primitive accumulation,’ because ‘capitalism in its full maturity also depends in all respects on non-capitalist strata . . . Capital needs the means of production and the labour power of the whole globe for untrammelled accumulation; it cannot manage without the natural resources and the labour power of all territories.’ Rosa Luxemburg. *The Accumulation of Capital*, pp. 345-346. David Harvey’s notion of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ builds on this insight by Luxemburg, see David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003, pp. 137-182.

⁵³ Rosa Luxemburg. *The Accumulation of Capital*, p. 61.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 496.

⁵⁶ Rosa Luxemburg. ‘The Crisis in the German Social Democracy,’ p. 388.

⁵⁷ Ibid.