

Rethinking spontaneity: Re-reading Luxemburg through Gramsci and Benjamin

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The Problem:

The relationship between spontaneity and conscious control has been central to the question of political organization since the beginning of the international workers' movement. Many of the old debates between Anarchists and Marxists, and within Marxism itself, had to do with the issue of how to best formulate this relationship. Those debates have a renewed significance in light of the recent shift away from traditional party and state-focused approaches toward more decentralized methods of resistance to capitalism.¹ Prompted by the bankruptcy of social democracy and a general suspicion of centralized control, this shift has been accompanied by a celebration of people's spontaneity. In response, some commentators have re-asserted the continued centrality of the state, as well as the limits of spontaneous resistance.²

But what does spontaneity mean? When we celebrate spontaneity and espouse suspicion toward centralized co-ordination, what are we celebrating? Conversely, when we point out the insufficiency of spontaneity, what exactly are we referring to? Despite the vast differences between these approaches, spontaneity tends to be understood in quite similar ways – as something that happens...well, spontaneously, i.e. without planning. Spontaneous activity seems to mystically appear from time to time as a force to be celebrated, encouraged, channelled, directed, harnessed, feared, quelled, etc. It appears that both advocates and critics of privileging spontaneity over conscious control tend to use the same mystified conception of what spontaneity is.

Luxemburg's Ambivalence and Her "Errors":

¹ See for example, Brecher, Jeremy and Costello, Tim and Smith, Brendan, *Globalization from Below: The Power of Solidarity*.

² See Panitch and Kagarlitsky: "Nation states are not victims of globalization, they are the authors of globalization. States are not *displaced* by globalized capital, they *represent* globalized capital, above all financial capital. This means that any adequate strategy to challenge globalization must begin at home, precisely because of the key role of states in making globalization happen" (Panitch 2001: 375). Similarly, Boris Kagarlitsky writes, "all international institutions represent continuations of national states, rest upon them and are powerless to act without them" (Kagarlitsky 2000: 16).

One of the most interesting advocates of the importance of spontaneity was Rosa Luxemburg. She appears to straddle both poles of the divide between spontaneity and conscious control. Although she was acutely aware of the need for a centralized party apparatus – she worked for years inside the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and was a founder of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) – she consistently argued for the centrality of spontaneity in the workers’ movement.

This apparent ambivalence has puzzled a number of Luxemburg scholars over the years. On the one hand, she appears to have argued that the contradictions of capitalism lead to its demise, and that the unfolding of this process moves workers into action. This view would make the role of an organization created for that purpose rather irrelevant. On the other hand, she clearly believed in the need for such an organization to intervene in this process. Some commentators have resolved this apparent paradox by locating a disjuncture between her political economy and her activist writing. Others have argued that these two perspectives speak to distinct moments in her political development.³ In general, however, she has been received, albeit critically, within the camp of the revolutionary socialist movement.⁴ I say *critically* received because almost all scholarship on Luxemburg from a revolutionary socialist perspective, no matter how praiseworthy, includes a section on her “errors”.

These “errors” are said to arise from a fatalistic conception of history. A considerable number of comrades critics have critiqued her for underestimating the role of the party and overestimating the spontaneous activity of workers in the struggle for socialism.⁵ Her fatalism has to do with the notion that workers’ spontaneity arises in response to “elemental forces of economic development.” Consequently, she has often been critiqued for being *economistic*, or what today is often called economic reductionism.

However, it may be possible to give Luxemburg a more generous reading. This requires an understanding of why she placed such great importance on workers’ spontaneity and a rethinking of what spontaneity is. She understood spontaneity as the initiative of the working class in response to its objective conditions.⁶ The reason she valued spontaneity, is because unlike the leadership of the SPD, which increasingly advocated the parliamentary route to socialism, she saw the workers’ own initiative as the only means to achieving such a fundamental social transformation.

Her focus on workers themselves as opposed to their representatives, advocates, and leaders, as the necessary agents of fundamentally transforming bourgeois society recalls Marx’s own approach. The *Provisional Rules* of the First International, written by Marx in 1866, likewise argue that: “the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.”⁷

For Marx, this principle of self-emancipation was understood by Marx as the only *realistic* route to a socialist society. Rather than a blueprint originating in the mind of a socialist visionary, the specific form of socialist society was to be produced through the long struggle of the oppressed. He believed that through this process of struggle, not just society, but also the oppressed themselves would be transformed in fundamental ways. Consequently, self-emancipation was, for Marx, absolutely central to his understanding of socialism.

³ See Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, for an outline of these positions.

⁴ See for example Lukacs, Molyneux, and Waters.

⁵ Lukacs, for example, put it as follows: “this false assessment of the true driving forces leads to the decisive point of her misinterpretation: to the underplaying of the role of the party in the revolution and of its conscious political action, as opposed to the necessity of being driven along by the elemental forces of economic development” (Lukacs, “Critical Observations on Rosa Luxemburg’s ‘Critique of the Russian Revolution,’” *History and Class Consciousness*, 275).

⁶ Given this formulation, one can see how she had been viewed as fatalistic; however, this does not have to be the case, as I explain below.

⁷ Marx, *The First International and After*, 82.

Spontaneity and Conscious Control

From the perspective it becomes clear why Luxemburg placed so much value on workers' spontaneity. If one believes that the working class must emancipate itself, and that no organization can do this *on its behalf*, then one places value on workers' self-activity. But what would be the role of a socialist organization? And what would this organization look like? These questions were at the heart of a number of debates between Luxemburg and another famous activist theorist, Vladimir Lenin.

Lenin shared much of Luxemburg's critique of social democracy, and likewise understood the working class as its own liberator. He placed considerable value on workers' self-organization, and was among the first socialists to grasp the significance of workers' councils (*soviets* in Russian) when they first appeared in 1905 St. Petersburg. His ideas changed considerably over the years and at times very closely approached those of Luxemburg⁸; however, they often disagreed on the relationship between spontaneity and conscious control. In times of state repression, Lenin argued for an organization consisting of the most class-conscious layer of the working class whose task was to facilitate the process of workers self-emancipation.⁹ Luxemburg cautioned that such an organization might actually itself pose a barrier to workers' self-emancipation because it may stifle spontaneity.¹⁰

Some theorists have sided with Luxemburg's "spontaneist" approach against Lenin, while others have favoured Lenin's method, noting Luxemburg's fatalism. Lukacs weighed in on this question decidedly on the side of Lenin.¹¹ Lukacs believed that capitalism demystified itself, fostering the formation of working class consciousness. However, he also understood that capitalism throws up new forms of mystification, which he sought to grasp with his concept of reification. The role of Lenin's party, he thought, was to help overcome these barriers and facilitate the formation of class-consciousness.¹² Understanding consciousness not as a product of ideas, but of activity, he viewed Lenin's approach of an activist party, which made demands on the activity of its members, as an advance over the parties of the Second International and over Luxemburg.¹³ Lenin's party, according to Lukacs,

⁸ See Marcel Liebman, *Leninism Under Lenin*.

⁹ Lenin, *What is to be done?*

¹⁰ Luxemburg, "Organizational Question of Social Democracy," *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 169.

¹¹ See Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*.

¹² "The struggle of the Communist Party is focused upon the class consciousness of the proletariat. Its organisational separation from the class does not mean in this case that it wishes to do battle *for its interests on its behalf and in its place*. [...] The process of revolution is – on a historical scale – synonymous with the process of the development of proletarian class consciousness" (Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, 315).

¹³ The heart of the debate between Lenin and Martov at the Second Congress of the RSDLP in 1903, which led to the split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, turned on the question of the role of rank-and-file members in the party. Lenin argued that membership should involve personal active engagement in the work of the party. This was a considerable departure from the traditional approach of parties of the Second International where membership involved a passive relationship consisting of support for the party program. This was the model proposed by Martov. Lenin's approach was an attempt to structure the party organization not for the purpose of taking power on behalf of the workers, as in the socialism-from-above approach of the Second International, but for the purpose of contributing to the process of making workers fit to govern themselves, as Marx put it. Lukacs wrote, "Every Communist Party represents a higher type of organisation than every bourgeois party or opportunist workers' party [Mensheviks], and this shows itself *in the greater demands made by the party on its individual members*. This emerged very clearly as early as the first split in Russian Social Democracy. Whereas for the Mensheviks (as for every fundamentally bourgeois party) the simple acceptance of the Party Programme was an adequate qualification for membership, for the Bolsheviks, party membership was synonymous with active personal participation in the work of the revolution" (Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, 316).

was a way to intervene in history, to make history, while Luxemburg's faith in workers' spontaneous activity leads her to fatalistically anticipate its own self-development.

But is that really the case? How do we reconcile this apparent fatalism with her work in the SPD and the KPD? It appears that Lukacs' reading of Luxemburg as economistic is limited by his own economistic understanding of spontaneity.

Demystifying Spontaneity 1: Gramsci and Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci's work is useful for demystifying this conception of spontaneity. In the *Prison Notebooks* he wrote, "pure" spontaneity does not exist in history: it would come to the same thing as 'pure' mechanicity. In the 'most spontaneous' movement it is simply that case that the elements of 'conscious leadership' cannot be checked, have left no reliable document. It may be said that spontaneity is therefore characteristic of the 'history of the subaltern classes'.¹⁴ Recall that Gramsci understood the 'subaltern' as subordinate classes who, by virtue of their marginalized position, have left few traces of their conscious activity. From this perspective, events that appear to have arisen spontaneously may simply have been organized by subordinate social groups, rather than the sanctioned official opposition, hence giving the impression of an absence of conscious planning. However, Gramsci did not romanticize this activity simply because it originates among the subaltern.¹⁵ While he recognized that subaltern classes are capable of self-activity, he acknowledged that this activity is not automatically revolutionary or even progressive.

This understanding returns us to the question of the relationship between spontaneity and conscious control, albeit reformulated as conscious subaltern self-activity and the conscious activity of a leading group interested in advancing the struggle. Gramsci argued for a thoughtful engagement with spontaneous movements that seeks to "educate", "direct", and "give them a conscious leadership".¹⁶

But the problem is more complex than a battle of ideas. As David McNally writes, "the political problem is not simply to dislodge the hegemony of ruling class ideas but, in fact, to destabilize our unconscious identifications with the commodity form itself."¹⁷ While Gramsci's analysis is quite strong when it comes to revealing conscious processes that hide behind apparently automatic reactions to economic conditions, it provides only a partial account of spontaneity. He argues convincingly that spontaneous activity often appears as unconscious because of the subordinate position of the groups that organize it; however, he sidesteps the unconscious side of spontaneity, which is left mystified.

Demystifying Spontaneity 2: Benjamin and the Collective Unconscious

A reading of Luxemburg through Walter Benjamin helps demystify the unconscious side of spontaneity. Using Gramsci, we can grasp Luxemburg's understanding of spontaneity – as the initiative of the working class in response to its objective conditions – not economistically, but as conscious self-activity. However, while spontaneity for Luxemburg involved self-activity, it was

¹⁴ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 196.

¹⁵ In fact, he cautioned that such activity is often accompanied by reactionary movements of the ruling classes that seek to lead it in directions that maintain existing social relations.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 199.

¹⁷ McNally, *Bodies of Meaning*, 232.

not entirely guided by conscious planning. While she recognized the conscious effort involved in apparently spontaneous uprisings, her description of such events clearly speaks to another phenomenon at work.

For example, consider her famous account of the wave of general strikes that swept Russia in 1905. I quote Luxemburg:

The sudden general rising of the proletariat in January under the powerful impetus of the St. Petersburg events was outwardly a political act of the revolutionary declaration of war on absolutism. But this first general direct action reacted inwardly all the more powerfully as it for the first time awoke class feeling and class-consciousness in millions upon millions as if by an electric shock. [...] the proletarian mass, counted by millions, quite suddenly and sharply came to realise how intolerable was that social and economic existence which they had patiently endured for decades in the chains of capitalism. Thereupon, there began a spontaneous general shaking of and tugging at these chains. All the innumerable sufferings of the modern proletariat reminded them of the old bleeding wounds.¹⁸

This rich description of the 1905 general strikes demonstrates how spontaneity, or self-activity, in those events was inspired and guided not *only* by conscious planning. Her imagery of the awakening of old bleeding wounds, of class-consciousness as if by electric shock, and by the lightning of the general strikes, speaks to other processes.

Years after Luxemburg's assassination, Walter Benjamin developed a conception of the unconscious that sheds some light on these processes. Drawing on Freud's concept of consciousness/the unconscious and Proust's ideas on memory, among others, Benjamin developed his conception of the collective unconscious.

In his 1939 essay, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", he investigated Freud's concept of consciousness. Following Freud, he argued that consciousness not only receives stimuli, but also protects against potentially shocking stimuli by absorbing them into narratives that repress the memory of these shocks. McNally puts it as follows, "Consciousness, in other words, spins a tale of security and stability in a dangerous and frightening world."¹⁹ The narratives with which consciousness grasps the world organizes it in a manner that protects us from traumatic shocks. The more successfully such shocks are parried by these narratives, the less they are experienced consciously; instead, they leave their mark on the unconscious as memory traces.

Benjamin conceived of these memory traces by drawing on Proust's concept of *involuntary memory*. "In the reflection which introduces the term," wrote Benjamin, "Proust tells us how poorly, for many years, he remembered the town of Combray in which, after all, he spent part of his childhood. One afternoon the taste of a kind of pastry called *madeleine* (which he later mentions often) transported him back to the past"²⁰ Benjamin understood these experiences of a sudden flash of memory as unconscious memory traces that have been triggered by something in the present. When consciousness acts as a shield that represses memories of sensory shocks, the unconscious acts as a storehouse of traces of these repressed memories.

¹⁸ Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike, Political Party, and Trade Unions," *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 171-2

¹⁹ McNally, *Bodies of Meaning*, 214.

²⁰ Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, 158.

Benjamin de-reified Freud's concept of consciousness/the unconscious by contextualizing it in bourgeois society. He noted that life under capitalism involves an acceleration of shock effects resulting in consciousness becoming increasingly protective. "The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions," he wrote, "the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience."²¹ Life under capitalism involves the experience of increasing shock effects, which develop the shielding aspect of consciousness. Susan Buck-Morss puts it as follows, "the aesthetic system undergoes a dialectical reversal. The human sensorium changes from a mode of being 'in touch' with reality into a means of blocking out reality. Aesthetics – sensory perception – becomes *anaesthetics*, a numbing of the senses."²²

Benjamin further departed from Freud by approaching consciousness/the unconscious as social phenomena.²³ The narratives that receive stimuli and repress memories of shocks are shared; they are part of the social world that individuals inhabit. Collective consciousness thus appears as a receptacle for stimuli, as well as a shield against potentially damaging stimuli that represses memories of their experience, while the collective unconscious contains traces of these repressed memories.

These insights illuminate a whole dimension of experience that helps us demystify the unconscious side of spontaneity. We begin to see how these apparent reflex reactions to objective conditions are deeply rooted in historical experience. In fact, Benjamin praised Luxemburg's Spartacist League – a left grouping within the SPD, which eventually split to form the KPD – for its orientation on the horrors of the past rather than forgetting the injustices of the past and focussing on the promise of the future, as was common in the social democracy of his day.²⁴ In his brilliant "Theses on the Philosophy of History" Benjamin wrote,

Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge. In Marx it appears as the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacist group, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. [...] Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.²⁵

This orientation on the past brings to light the role of history in consciousness-formation. Notice that similar to Luxemburg, Benjamin focused on motivational factors that are not strictly rational. While Luxemburg did not have the language with which to grasp this phenomenon, she noted that workers experienced a sudden awakening in the process of struggle. In light of Benjamin's understanding of history as collective trauma, we can begin to understand the logic behind this awakening.

²¹ Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, 163.

²² Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 104.

²³ This approach is consistent with the Marxist tradition, which insists, "consciousness is [...] from the very beginning a social product" (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 51).

²⁴ Today, stuck in the eternal present, social democrats have not only forgotten the past, but they have also forgotten the promise of the future.

²⁵ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, 260.

Understanding Spontaneity Historically

In light of this attempted demystification of spontaneity using Gramsci and Benjamin, we can move beyond various mystical understandings of spontaneity, including economic reductionism. Spontaneity begins to appear less like an automatic response to the unfolding of the contradictions of capitalism, and more like conscious self-activity on the one hand, and a return of repressed collective trauma in a moment of collective struggle, on the other.

Rather than fatalistic, Luxemburg appears to have had an acute *historical* sense of consciousness-formation. Marx insisted that people make history, but not under conditions of their choosing. These conditions, for Marx were not simply economic, but were shaped by “the tradition of all the dead generations [that] weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”²⁶ Benjamin understood this nightmare to be shaped by repressed memories of collective trauma.

This nightmare – which contains an economic dimension, but which cannot be reduced to economics – forms the terrain on which struggle takes place. These repressed memories contain energy that is regularly mobilized to maintain bourgeois society, but Benjamin believed that this energy could also be tapped to transform bourgeois society; in fact, he saw it as the very source of this transformation. This understanding of the collective unconscious may be precisely what accounts for Luxemburg’s observations of spontaneity in the 1905 general strikes.

Concluding Remarks:

From this perspective, spontaneity takes on a new significance. Rather than a force to be directed, educated, channelled, etc. toward a pre-conceived notion of class-consciousness,²⁷ it appears as the very source of class-consciousness, which needs to be awakened.²⁸ Consequently, a socialist orientation toward spontaneity requires an approach oriented on this awakening.

What this involves on a practical level is not immediately clear. However, what is clear is that class-consciousness cannot be brought in “from the outside,” but must be brought to consciousness from the collective unconscious of the oppressed themselves. This awakening, which is synonymous with the process of revolution, occurs in the course of struggle. But it does not occur automatically. This unfortunate fact accounts for why Luxemburg saw the need for organization despite her focus on spontaneity.

Returning to the role of socialists and socialist organization, we can make the following general remarks, which require further elaboration. Lukacs was absolutely correct that while capitalism demystifies itself, it also fosters new forms of mystification, which Lenin’s conception of the party aims to overcome. However, in addition to these forms of mystification, capitalism involves a multi-faceted

²⁶ Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 15.

²⁷ In Lukacs this pre-conceived notion of class-consciousness appears as “imputed” class-consciousness. See his “Class Consciousness,” in *History and Class Consciousness*, pp. 46-82.

²⁸ Buck-Morss writes that Benjamin viewed collective consciousness “as a dreamworld, and a conception of collective ‘awakening’ from it as synonymous with revolutionary class consciousness.” (Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 253).

deskilling²⁹ process, which erects barriers to awakening that Lukacs and Lenin did not account for. Consequently, the role of a socialist organization is on the one hand much more limited than Lenin believed (as Luxemburg argued³⁰), but on the other hand, it is much more necessary than “spontaneists” (those who fetishize spontaneity) believe. Not only must it overcome the problem of reification, but it must also overcome all the processes that block awakening. This is a tall order that requires an analysis of these processes, and a thoughtful re-consideration of Lenin’s approach to organization in order to overcome on a practical level the barriers that such an analysis identifies.

²⁹ I am not only referring to deskilling that results from the fragmentation of the production process (which has been well researched), but also the *political deskilling*, which arises from the fact that our experience in bourgeois society damages our capacities for collective self-activity. See Kuhling and Levant, *Political Deskilling/Reskilling: Flying Squads and the Crisis of Working Class Consciousness/Self-Organization*, (with Clarice Kuhling) in Caelie Frampton, Gary Kinsman, Andrew Thompson, Kate Tilleczek, eds., "Sociology for Changing the World: Social Movements/Social Research," (Fernwood Publishing, 2006).

³⁰ Moreover, it was limited by an economic understanding of the terrain of struggle, for which Lenin compensated with compulsory demands for participation in the work of the party. Luxemburg critiqued Lenin’s approach as subjectivist and voluntarist. She believed that he was “playing schoolmaster with the revolution.” In contrast, her approach accorded much less power of intervention to the vanguard, highlighting the constraints of the terrain of struggle, which in this analysis appears as historical rather than strictly economic.

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