



Spontaneity in Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919)

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A leading figure in European Marxism during the period of the Second International, Rosa Luxemburg was centrally involved in strategic organizational debates concerning the relation between party and class. Her contributions were implicitly underwritten by a notion of spontaneity that stemmed from her analysis of the Russian revolutionary events of 1905 in terms of the concept of 'mass strike' [*Massenstreik*]. This is not synonymous with 'general strike' understood as a coordinated withdrawal of labor across sectors, but denotes something more general still—the mass strike is "*the method of motion of the proletarian mass, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution*" (1906: 192). It thus includes all the means through which the proletariat develops itself, politically and intellectually, as an agency of historical change. For Luxemburg, this self-development is tantamount to self-emancipation, and it is tied to her idea of spontaneity in that it hinges on the revolutionary potential of initiatives on the part of the proletariat that are not planned or led by a vanguard party. Luxemburg placed strategic priority on such spontaneity, on "the active, untrammelled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people" (1918a: 302). She did not thereby reject the need for a centralized party organization, however, nor does the spontaneity in question imply impromptu or spur-of-the-moment actions. Key to this sense of spontaneity is that it has deep historical roots in proletarian experience: the mass strike is "the indication [...] of a whole period of the class struggle lasting for years, perhaps for decades" (1906: 192). The salience of Luxemburgian spontaneity thus lies, not in proletarian political action being undetermined or undisciplined, but in its being a matter of *self-determination* and "*voluntary self-discipline*" (1905: 254). For Luxemburg, the essence of socialism "consists in the fact that the great laboring mass [gives] the entire political and economic life [...] a conscious, free and autonomous direction" (1918b: 350). This spontaneism was unorthodox at the time, and owing to its being left undertheorized, it has often been dismissed as being based on a faulty economic reductionism that posits the historical inevitability of revolutionary change.

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