

Revolution and really being alive

In a long and passionate letter to her lover written on the 24th June 1898, Rosa Luxemburg describes her relation to the most dreadful thought she knows.

[T]his feeling of shuddering horror does not let go of me [...] Especially when I lie down to sleep, this fact [of my mother's death] immediately arises again before my eyes, and I have to groan out loud from pain. I don't know how it is with you but I don't suffer mainly from longing anymore and I don't suffer on my own account, but what makes me shudder every time is this one thought: what kind of life was that! What has this person lived through, what is the point of a life like that! I don't know of any thought that is so dreadful for me as this one; I feel as though it would tear me apart if I began to think about it, and yet it comes to me under the most surprising circumstances, at any moment.¹

Luxemburg's major theoretical work, *The Accumulation of Capital*, was written to explain how for capitalist economies "expansion becomes a condition of existence." For capitalism to survive, accumulation must be made to "continue *ad infinitum* without any friction."² What meanwhile remains the single life started, lived and ended in the shadow of that infinity (in this case, as if it were just any, the life of her mother, "this person") is rounded up in the end into a point, "the point of a life like that." The point certainly cannot be known: it is never convincingly just a fact or a phenomenon. The question "what is the point of a life like that" is not for answering, it is for not answering, for being unable to answer. Its value for the person who seriously and repetitively asks it, and it is a question that can only be asked repetitively, is that, little by little, she will learn by asking it to know the meaning of not having an answer. That meaning is learned, primarily, not by an act of understanding, but by a history of feeling, a life of radically speechless accommodation to the consistencies of horror and disgust. The "feeling of shuddering horror does not let go"; the most dreadful thought makes her shudder, every time it comes back, with such tremendous violence that it threatens to tear her apart. But still it comes back. What is the point of a life like that.

¹ *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Georg Adler, Peter Hudis and Annelies Laschitza, trans. George Shriver, London: Verso, 2011, pp.73-4.

² Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, trans. Agnes Schwarzschild, London: Routledge, 2010, p.12, 91.

Luxemburg's shuddering looks like an intensification of Kant's *Erschütterung*, the shuddering or vibration inflicted on the mind confronted with the sublime in nature. "What is excessive for the imagination", Kant wrote in the third critique, "is as it were an abyss, in which it fears to lose itself."³ Both types of shuddering threaten absolute loss, the one caused by a representation, *Vorstellung*, that makes the mind shake so hard that the subject will, at any moment, lose control and slide or be plunged into an *Abgrund* in which it will never be found, the other caused by the most dreadful thought coming back, that the end of life is its contraction to a point too diminutive and trivial for an answer, not oblivion but, what is more terrible, persistence as a profitless *speck* lost in the infinite expanse of capital: a pinprick of existence in what Marx called "the shit-heap of history."⁴

In this same letter to her lover, Luxemburg mentions for the first time her next and most urgent writing project, the refutation of Eduard Bernstein's articles in *Neue Zeit*, the theoretical journal of the German Social Democratic Party, in which that renegade and former comrade argued for the renunciation of the revolutionary class struggle in favour of political reform.⁵ Luxemburg's essay, 'Social Reform or Revolution', published three months later in September 1898, vigorously rejects the view that working class people have a narrow or limited intellectual life. "No coarser insult, no baser defamation, can be thrown against the workers than the remark "Theoretical controversies are only for intellectuals."⁶ The point of a still living wage labourer's life is not, as Jacques Rancière has accused Marx of thinking, that he "*has only one thing to do*—to make the revolution."⁷ The living wage labourer was for Luxemburg, as he was also for Trotsky, the best and fundamental theoretician of revolution. "The entire strength of the modern labor movement rests on theoretical knowledge," Luxemburg defiantly proclaimed; it is on the proletariat's mind, heart and senses, and not just on his shoulders, that the movement rests.⁸ In the passage from *The Holy Family* in which Rancière thinks that Marx restricts the point of the proletariat life to doing one thing, Marx writes that "man has lost himself in the proletariat", almost as though the

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the power of judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge: CUP, 2001, p.141; *Werke*, vol. X, *Kritik der Urteilskraft und naturphilosophische Schriften 2*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968, pp.345-6.

⁴ Marx to Laura Lafargue, cit. in Jacques Attali, *Karl Marx ou l'esprit du monde*, Paris: Fayard, 2005, p.319: "Je suis une machine à dévorer des livres pour les vomir ensuite sous une autre forme sur le tas de fumier de l'Histoire." My translation.

⁵ *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, p.68.

⁶ *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Dick Howard, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp.54.

⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, ed. Andrew Parker, trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster and Andrew Parker, Durham: Duke UP, 2003, p.80.

⁸ *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, p.54.

proletariat were the abyss in which the speck, humanity, had been plunged: an infinite expanse, “the abstraction of all humanity”, in which “man”, that superannuated universal subject, is never to be found again.⁹ But Marx would not end his sentence on that dramatic echo of the ‘Analytic of the Sublime’; he would press on with it like this:

[M]an has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative *need*—the practical expression of *necessity*—is driven directly to revolt against this inhumanity.¹⁰

For Marx in 1845, that revolt would lead to the self-emancipation of the proletariat through its abolition of the conditions of its own life, which could not be done “without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own situation.”¹¹ Marx’s account of the proletariat was from the beginning based on a concept of what that class *amounts to*, what it is in the end, or rather, how it *is* the end: the point of the proletarian life is, first of all, that it is the sum of the inhuman. Luxemburg in ‘Social Reform or Revolution’ affirms the same “final goal” for Social Democracy in more prosaic, less Hegelian language: “the conquest of political power and the suppression of wage labor.”¹² The abolition of the sum of the inhuman means, literally and fundamentally, no more of the “indirect slavery” of wage labour.¹³ With his softer focus for a more bearable political outlook, Bernstein had reduced “the class consciousness of the proletariat” to “a mere ideal whose force of persuasion rests only on the perfections attributed to it,” Luxemburg explained. In a flight to abstraction characteristic of the petty bourgeois mentality which Marx said was “composed of On The One Hand and One The Other Hand”,¹⁴ each more grasping than the other, Bernstein had set aside the reality of feeling: the terrible horror, shuddering and disgust, the being torn apart by the contraction of life to a point too diminutive and trivial for an answer, the unbearable lostness in abstraction and in an expanse

⁹ *Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works*, vol.4, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975, pp.36-7.

¹⁰ *Collected Works*, vol.4, p.37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, p.52.

¹³ “Indirect slavery” is the expression used by Marx to distinguish the European proletariat from the black slaves in South America and in the southern states of North America. Marx to P.V. Annenkov, 28th December 1846, *Selected Correspondence 1846-1895*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1943, p.13.

¹⁴ Marx to J.B. von Schweitzer, 24th January 1865, *Selected Correspondence 1846-1895*, p.176.

without ground. Feeling like that is not just “theoretical consciousness”, but also the urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative *need* for revolution.¹⁵

Writing that is powerful enough to express that horror and that need with its real historic urgency will not be just “the critique of political economy”, if what is meant by that name is nothing but the serene revision and rejection of inaccurate, ideological analyses of value and of relations of production. Marx’s ambition in his own writing, which he emphatically described as “an artistic whole”,¹⁶ can be guessed from his criticism of Proudhon’s *Qu’est-ce que la propriété?* in a letter to J.B. von Schweitzer, Lassalle’s successor in the leadership of the General Association of German Workers, written in 1865, shortly before the completion of volume one of *Das Kapital*. Marx liked *What Is Property?* best out of all Proudhon’s works, because of its “provocative defiance”, its “brilliant paradox which made a mock of the ordinary bourgeois mind”, its “withering criticism” and “bitter irony”, “and, revealed here and there behind these, a deep and genuine feeling of indignation at the infamy of the existing order, a revolutionary earnestness.” These achievements, Marx said, had “electrified the readers” of Proudhon’s book.¹⁷ The same image recurs in Marx’s celebration, years later, of “the bloody uprising of the people in Palermo” which he says “worked like an electric shock on the paralysed masses of the people and woke their great revolutionary memories and passions.”¹⁸ Marx added to his admiring comment on Proudhon that “[i]n a strictly scientific history of political economy” (the type of history, that is, that Althusser wanted for proletarian readers of *Das Kapital*, who must be instructed to regard that book as “pure theory” and not as literature),

the book [*Qu’est-ce que la propriété?*] would hardly be worth mentioning. But sensational works of this kind play their part in the sciences just as much as in the history of the novel. Take, for instance, Malthus’ book *On Population*. In its first edition it was nothing but a “sensational pamphlet” and *plagiarism* from

¹⁵ Fundamental to the revolutionary project of Situationism was the extension of the coverage of horror to all grievances and irritations in capitalist society, however petty they might usually be accounted. “La simple sensation immédiate des “nuisances” et des dangers [...] qui agressent tout d’abord et principalement la grande majorité, c’est-à-dire les pauvres, constitue déjà un immense facteur de révolte, une exigence vitale des exploités, tout aussi matérialiste que l’a été la lutte des ouvriers du XIX^e siècle pour la possibilité de manger.” “Thèses sur l’Internationale situationniste et son temps” (1972), Guy Debord, *Œuvres*, ed. Jean-Louis Rançon, Paris: Gallimard, p.1101 (thesis 17).

¹⁶ “[T]he merit of my writings is that they are an artistic whole.” Marx to Engels, 31st July 1865, *Selected Correspondence 1846-1895*, p.204.

¹⁷ Marx to J.B. von Schweitzer, 24th January 1865, *Selected Correspondence 1846-1895*, p.170.

¹⁸ *Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works*, vol.10, pp.51-2.

beginning to end into the bargain. And yet what a *stimulus* was produced by this *libel on the human race!*¹⁹

Das Kapital is more than just provocative defiance, brilliant paradox, withering criticism and bitter irony, but it is all those things, and its specific electric shock is not for “Messrs. the political economists”, as Marx contemptuously named his adversaries in science, but for the body and mind paralysed and shuddering with horror at the contraction of life to a point too trivial and diminutive for an answer, life in its persistence as a profitless speck lost in the infinite expanse of capital, and equally lost there whether dead or living.

More even than the most penetrating analyses of ideology or critiques of political economy, and in common with the very best of them by Marx, it is poetry that inflicts this specific shock against the paralytic subject. Poetry is passion: whether a passion for life or for death, the maximum intensity of Wordsworth or of Keats, poetry at its most radical is “a deep and genuine feeling of indignation”—if not an explicit indignation at “the infamy of the existing order”, then, at the very least, an intrinsic indignation at “the point of a life like that”, the contraction of a whole life into a speck lost in the infinite expanse of capital. Luxemburg complained in another letter of 1898, this time to her friend Robert Seidel, about the miserable poetry of her German contemporaries. “[T]hese current “songs” from our tribe of scribblers [...] for the most part are no songs at all, but just a droning without colour or tone, like the sound of a cogwheel spinning in a machine.”²⁰ The problem, she thought, was nothing so simple as unoriginality, or technical incompetence, let alone anything so recondite as an overinvestment in the lyric subject and its pronoun, or a too naïve understanding of the dictates of an irreversible history of expression specific to art; or perhaps it was indeed failures like those that dissatisfied her, but in that case she nonetheless chose to express her dissatisfaction not directly with the artifice of the poems, but rather with the type of life she imagined their authors must lead.

I believe that the source of this [problem with contemporary poetry] lies in the fact that people, when they’re writing, forget for the most part to go deeper inside themselves and experience the full import and truth of what they’re writing. I believe that people need to live in the subject matter fully and really experience it every time, every day [...] But people are so used to one or another truth or verity

¹⁹ *Selected Correspondence 1846-1895*, p.170.

²⁰ *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, 65.

that they prattle or spout about the deepest and greatest subjects as though they were mumbling a Pater Noster. I hereby vow never to forget when I'm writing to be inspired again, on each occasion, about what I'm writing and to go inside myself for that.²¹

The problem with the most influential theories of radical poetics of the last forty or so years is that they have more or less blindly adopted an Althusserian program for the de-subjectivization of language, whose best received idea for poetry is that expression should be eradicated in favour of explicitation so that readers will not be dupes and poets will not be egos. This schema has been wildly successful in the domesticated space of the English or communication studies department, principally for the reason that it is, cognitively speaking, very easy to assent to, if not yet to understand in any detail, but also because it makes its users feel entitled to regard themselves as radical and on the side of the revolution, on the grounds that the vocabulary of the schema seems to belong to Marxism. But in truth it is impossible to imagine answering a demand like Luxemburg's for a revolutionary poetry with anything written by Charles Bernstein or Ron Silliman; they have in any case explicitly repudiated the project, and even the possibility, of a poetry passionately and strenuously worked out from "experience [of] the full import and truth" of what is being written, along with the idea that "people need to live in the subject matter fully and really experience it", which can be dismissed, with a flicker of the nostril or eyebrow, as Romanticism or some other ideology of the bygone authentic. But the experience that Luxemburg, in a projection and a fantasy, for sure, regrets is missing from the lives of poets droning without colour or tone, the experience of living in the subject, fully and really, and of vowing to stake life on its expression—this experience is simply not one that poetry can dispense with, set aside, or dismiss as a fiction of narcissism, however cleverly, without at the same time extinguishing whatever pretensions it may have to be revolutionary art; and the reason for that is as much to do with the single life and its point as it is to do with the history of revolution itself: people never in their lives feel so fully and really alive as they do in revolutions. There is not a single revolution since 1789 whose annals and fictions are not overflowing with repetitions of that single testimony. It is the constant song, infinitely reprised, from St. Petersburg to Cairo, from the Paris of 1968 even to the London protests of 2003 and 2011, however much those events fell short of revolution. Without the electric shock to paralysed subjectivity, without

²¹ *Ibid.*

inflicting a feeling of shuddering, even of shattering horror at “the point of a life like that”, without being torn apart with disgust at the sum of the inhuman and at the finality without answer of an end lost in the infinity of capitalist accumulation, poetry may still be a very sophisticated art, good for making existing relations explicit, but it will not be revolutionary. Revolutionary poetry may, exceptionally, have nothing at all to say about any fact that will be identified as political; its grammar may be thoroughly opaque and its sentences almost totally free of direct social reference. But imperatively it must do this one thing: it must hurt and thrill a reader with an irresistible premonition of the feeling of being more fully and really alive than ever before, the feeling that is the true, unmistakable and inalienable basis of revolutionary subjective universality.