

Lecture given at the Rosa Luxemburg Conference, Chicago, April 2018.

Beyond Nationalisms: Spontaneity and Working Class Organization in Scotland, 2013-2017, through the lens of Luxemburg's dialectic.

I will preface this talk with some disclaimers. Luxemburg consistently and explicitly rejected both nationalism and national self-determination as desired political forms throughout her career, so why use her theory of spontaneity and organization to analyze politics in a geographical area, Scotland, in which a national self-determination struggle has dominated recent politics? I will return to this question later in the talk. Moreover, the "beyond nationalisms" in the title is surely overly optimistic. While most present today would wish it otherwise, all but tiny minorities of the contemporary population of Scotland remain stuck in ways of engaging in politics in which national consciousness is preponderant. Scottish nationalism, English nationalism and British nationalism are three distinct, although overlapping, entities. To provide clues as to why the influence of these competing nationalisms in Scotland now appears to be as strong as at any time in the past three hundred years, it will help to retrace Marxist conceptions of the nation and nationalism. Before doing this however, I want to turn to one of Luxemburg's key statements on spontaneity and organization.

Perhaps her most famous utterance on the subject comes in her extended article *In the Revolutionary Hour: What Now*, first published in Polish in *Czerwony Sztandar*, the party organ of the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, hereafter SDKPiL, in April and May 1905. It may be pertinent to remind ourselves that when Luxemburg writes "the Social Democracy," as she does in the passage in question, she is specifically referring to the SDKPiL, i.e. "the Social-Democratic Party." For Luxemburg, this would have appeared an obvious linguistic choice: party activists appeared to have normally called the party "Socjaldemokracja," leaving out the long appendages to the party name, so why should Luxemburg have broken that habit, particularly when writing in the party journal? For readers retracing Luxemburg's thoughts over a hundred years later however, a number of the earlier translations of Luxemburg have muddied the waters. Luxemburg use of "Socjaldemokracja" to mean the SDKPiL has often been translated into English simply as "Social Democracy," omitting the definite article without any gloss, leading unwary readers to think she's referring to Social Democracy in Europe in general, and not to one specific party. The delicate point is that Luxemburg *is* referring to Social Democracy in Europe in general, *and* to this specific party. So when we re-read the following position on spontaneity, we should re-read it in the party context it was composed in, especially in relation to Luxemburg's adamant opposition to the rival Polish socialist party, the PPS. Luxemburg:

"The working class in all countries only *learns* to fight in the process of its struggle. Only parties such as the PPS, which smugly presume to be a socialist and workers' party, and which are essentially thoroughly foreign to the essence of class struggle, can constantly claim with a pompous air that they've always got a ready-made plan in their pocket, with which to give "orders" to the working class about what they have to do and how they have to do it. [My editorial interpolation: The] Social Democracy, by contrast – which is merely the proletariat's vanguard, a part of the whole working mass, the blood of its blood and the flesh of its flesh – [the] Social Democracy searches and finds paths and slogans for the workers' struggle, simply commensurate with the development of this struggle, whereby Social Democracy [also] draws clues for the path ahead solely from this struggle."ⁱ [Luxemburg's own italics.]

There are so many striking features in this passage that we should agree to return to it another day: one short lecture cannot elucidate all its aspects. Particularly, Luxemburg's appropriation of Christian

semantics for revolutionary socialist purposes deserves a lecture in its own right: she uses this rhetorical technique at several points in her writings. When she states here that the SDKPiL is “merely the proletariat’s vanguard, a part of the whole working mass, the blood of its blood and the flesh of its flesh,” Luxemburg hints at the idea of transubstantiation, albeit only metaphorically, to suggest that a party functioning as a vanguard could be transformed by the proletariat. It is very important to note the causality implied here: this sentence is about the proletariat transforming the party, not about the party transforming the proletariat. Based on this and other propositions from Luxemburg, we should be wary of categorizing her as a supporter of vanguardism. While many leftist organizations today still work with a Leninist definition of what the vanguard party should be and should do, we can gain more by contrasting Luxemburg’s position on the issue with the Trotskyist tradition, as characterized by Ernst Mandel:

“The dynamic of revolutionary events is directly determined by the rapid, intensive and passionate psychological conversion from the pre-revolutionary class structures...the masses engage in revolution entirely without a finished plan for social transformation, but in experiencing the bitter sentiment of no longer being able to tolerate the old regime. It is only the leading sections of the class that possess a political program which, nonetheless, needs to be verified by events and approved by the masses.”ⁱⁱ

Contrast this, with the antiauthoritarian bent in the preceding extended quote from Luxemburg. She stresses the working class learning, for itself, how to fight, and encourages them to refuse orders from any party who tells them “what they have to do and how they have to do it.” The party is “*merely* the proletariat’s vanguard,” [my italics] but is indistinguishable from it “a part of the whole working mass.” This is a very long way from Lenin’s support for “a centralized, vanguard party of professional revolutionaries,”ⁱⁱⁱ held at the time of the RSDLP’s Second Congress in 1903.

What the Scottish working class has learnt about their fight in the course of their recent struggles has not been learnt in isolation, but in international alliances, and in alliances with some sections of the middle-classes. It has not been learnt under the tutelage of a centralized, vanguard party. To expand on this, I wish to first address what the nation and nationalism mean in a Marxist context.

The Scottish sociologist Neil Davidson has argued that Marx and Engels themselves used the word nation in a “very loosely and in a common-sense way,”^{iv} i.e. that it is fruitless to take their statements about specific nations as a foundation for a Marxist discussion of the matter. Instead, as Davidson proceeds to point out, it is Marx’ theory of ideology that can illuminate how nations and nationalisms function. If in the 19th century, to interpret Marx, people “produced” religion as an opiate to cope with the emptiness of their alienation, this function in the 20th and 21st centuries has increasingly been taken on by nationalism.^v Moreover, it may help to reiterate that our current system of nation states, which has grown up parallel to nationalism, is nothing preordained or eternal. Rather, national consciousness, without which nation states could not function, arises at a particular stage of political and economic development. When such national consciousness first took shape in Scotland is a moot point, among both Marxist and non-Marxist historians and social scientists. Generally, there are two camps, the first reasoning that national consciousness – and with it the Scottish nation – came into being during and after the Wars of Independence with England, from 1296 to 1357. Members of the second camp contend, in what may seem like a paradox, that a Scottish identity stretching across the whole territory of Scotland only emerged *after* the Scottish state itself had been scrapped, following the Treaty of Union with England in 1707.

There is more consensus that Scotland today is a “stateless nation,” a category that has also been used to describe Quebec and Catalonia. A number of other countries might merit this same classification. Yet the significance of listing Scotland alongside Quebec and Catalonia is that none of these three qualify as “oppressed nations,” to use Lenin’s terminology. This does not, however, turn Scotland into an “oppressor nation” by default. The messy truth is that Scotland has been and is both an oppressed *and* an oppressor nation. Historian Tom Devine has shown that Scots played an over proportional role at all levels of the British Empire, from foot soldiers to prime ministers. He has also blasted away the persistent myth that Scots were somehow the kinder imperialists, by illuminating the zealous roles played by Scots in the genocides against indigenous peoples in North America. It is with this deeply ambiguous inheritance that citizens *in* Scotland – note, not the same thing as citizens *of* Scotland – were asked to vote in the independence referendum in 2014.

Rosa Luxemburg dismissed the existence of any “right” of national self-determination. In *The National Question and Autonomy*, written in 1908-09 for the Polish-language journal that Luxemburg co-edited, *Przegląd socjaldemokratyczny*, Luxemburg states:

“A “right of nations” which is valid for all countries and all times is nothing more than a metaphysical cliché of the type of “rights of man” and “rights of the citizen.” Dialectic materialism, which is the basis of scientific socialism, has broken once and for all with this type of “eternal” formula. For the historical dialectic has shown that there are no “eternal” truths and that there are no “rights.”.... Historical materialism has taught us that the real content of these “eternal” truths, rights, and formulae is determined only by the *material* social conditions of the environment in a given historical epoch.”^{vi}

Later in the same text, Luxemburg mounts a broadside against democracy dominated by plebiscites. While the historical context Luxemburg refers to is the series of manipulated votes held by Napoleon Bonaparte from 1800 to consolidate his hold on power, when Luxemburg writes of “despots...taking advantage of the political ignorance and economic subjection of the masses,” British readers particularly will be prompted to think about the forces that led to two history-changing referenda being held in the UK within the last five years.

On September 18, 2014, voters in Scotland were asked to respond to the ballot paper question: “Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?” The decision taken in 2012 by David Cameron, then British prime minister, to hold an official referendum on the issue, reflects his bet on hegemony enacted in economic terms over the Scottish masses, and their ignorance about which choice would be politically expedient for themselves, to secure easily the result he wanted. The reality of economic subjection cannot be magicked away; but the gamble on the masses’ political ignorance was to later blow up in Cameron’s face.

When electoral roll registration closed on September 2, 2014, ninety-seven per cent of those eligible to vote had registered. This was the highest level of voter registration at any election held in the UK since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1928. The franchise extended far beyond British citizens living in Scotland, to include citizens of 53 British Commonwealth states, and of 26 European Union states, resident in Scotland. In contrast to UK general elections, with their voting age of eighteen, sixteen and seventeen year olds were granted the vote for the Scottish Indyref. This broadening of the franchise did not mean everyone was allowed a ballot paper: it is particularly regrettable that convicted prisoners, paperless citizens and stateless citizens were not permitted to vote. Nonetheless, it was a substantially more inclusive franchise than normal for any meaningful vote held inside the European Union. At the Federal Parliament Elections held in Germany in September 2017, by way of

comparison, the franchise was, as usual, restricted to German citizens, leaving nearly eight million adults living in Germany – eleven percent of the *potential* adult electorate – without a vote.^{vii}

What's more, the unparalleled success of this voter registration campaign is as an achievement of working class organization in Scotland. Why belittle it in comparison with what may appear to be more impressive working class accomplishments of the past? Luxemburg's dialectic of spontaneity and organization contends that working class people can only learn what it is they are fighting for in the course of their struggle. Luxemburg's theory was shaped by her close observations and encyclopedic documentation of the Russian Revolution of 1904-1906. The mass strikes of this period contained many wildcat actions. Such spontaneity was only possible because the proletariat were highly concentrated in certain locations and industries, and organized through their work processes, as they were in the oil and petrol industry in Baku, in what is now Azerbaijan. By contrast, the workforce in Scotland in the 2010s is casualized, fragmented and largely non-unionized or de-unionized. Pockets of concentration remain, like the call-centers in which one in ten adults work in Glasgow, Scotland's largest city. The reasons why substantial strike action has not emerged from such locations in the UK in the present period merit further attention, but lie outwith the scope of this talk. Voter registration was, by contrast, one field in which working class people, through alliances with other groups, could organize spontaneously and effectively in Scotland in 2014.

What did working class people in Scotland learn about their current and future struggle from contesting the Scottish Indyref? Like the electorate as a whole, the Scottish working class was deeply divided on the issue. Yet polling conducted immediately prior to and on referendum day has proven that people in working class occupations, classified in this research as "C2DEs," were more likely to vote Yes to independence than people working in middle-class jobs.^{viii} Statistics concerning the poorest sections of the working class are more striking: of people living in one of the 20% most deprived neighborhoods in Scotland, a full 65 percent voted Yes.^{ix} Overall, two million people voted for No and 1.6 million voted for Yes, so we can conclude that there were also hundreds of thousands of working class No voters.

While the working class vote split, it is hard to detect any mass or popular movement behind the No campaign in 2014. Indicators that a social movement did form to push for a Yes vote in the same year are compelling. It is possible for Marxists to take Luxemburg's line, and argue that national self-determination movements are an aberration that fuel reactionary nationalism, and yet *simultaneously acknowledge* that there were convincing reasons why voting Yes was politically expedient for the working class in Scotland in 2014. To concede that many working class voters saw independence as being the option that best represented their class interest. Justifications for supporting Scotland's secession raised and continue to raise the question whether or not an independent Scotland would strengthen the working class, emphasizing that "the working class with which we should be concerned [with in answering this question] is not only British, still less only Scottish, but international."^x The Radical Independence Campaign also propagated this internationalist case for voting Yes in 2014, illuminating parallels between the Radical Yes campaign and the " 'break-up of the UK and British Empire' strategy," pursued "by James Connolly after 1896, and by John Maclean after 1919."^{xi} In the build up to the Indyref, The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office itself voiced fears that the UK's international competitors would use the aftermath of a vote in favor of separation to attempt to have the UK removed from its seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.^{xii} The longstanding political goal to have Trident nuclear weapons removed from their Scottish base on the Clyde, the only

UK location where nuclear warheads are stationed, is supported by a wide alliance of political actors, including the Scottish National Party, Scotland's largest political party during the last five years. The absence of other deep water bases on the UK coastline for docking the nuclear submarines that carry Trident means that relocation would entail massive expense, with figures between £25 billion and £50 billion pounds being floated by experts.^{xiii} It is not hard to see why the vast majority of individuals in the British ruling class opposed and still oppose breaking up the status quo, a step which could involve forcing profiteers in the arms industry to foot part of the bill for such major physical and economic restructuring. Setting forth a related reasoning in their book *Scottish Independence – A Feminist Response*, published in the run-up to the vote in September 2014, Cat Boyd and Jenny Morrison “unambiguously assert that the militarism of Britain is detrimental to women, and [that] the militaristic society, the skeletal remains of the British empire, appropriates feminist terminology to justify the horrors of neo-imperialism.”^{xiv}

There was certainly no revolution in Scotland in 2014, but there was a massive upsurge in political engagement, leading to a tremendous growth in party membership. Compare this with the expansion in the membership of the Polish parties during the 1905 and 1906 Revolution: evidence suggests that membership levels of the PPS and the SDKPiL, in 1906 around 60,000 and 30,000 respectively, were between twenty and thirty times greater than they were before the revolution.^{xv} In a rise of comparable magnitude, membership of the two main parties supporting Scottish independence, the Scottish National Party (known as the SNP) and the Scottish Greens, rose dramatically during and after the referendum, with the SNP quadrupling from 25,000 members in 2013, to over 100,000 in 2015.^{xvi} Despite this huge numerical growth, there continues to be substantial resistance from many proponents of independence to the SNP's leadership of the movement. There are sound reasons for this, which include voicing the demand to proceed with a horizontal, as opposed to a hierarchical, method of organization. Leftists who dismiss all national liberation movements out of hand, and therefore argue that socialists should have nothing to do with the leadership of such organizations, may wish to confront the fact that the working class in all countries currently have no choice *but* to live in nation states. Is it not pessimistic paternalism to reject all people's calls for reconfiguring the nation states they *have to* live in, regardless of their specific circumstances? Can the journey *beyond* nation states to workers' states be achieved whilst ignoring the dominant forms of consciousness experienced *within* the walls of the nation state? I wish to conclude by quoting Lyn Jones, an activist in Scotland in 2014 and 2015:

“The radical independence movement did not privilege nation over class, but sought to pursue the politics of class within a new nation. This may well be starry-eyed and utopian, but folk politics it is not.”^{xvii}

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Translated from: Rosa Luxemburg: *In revolutionärer Stunde: Was weiter?* In: *Gesammelte Werke*. Band 1.2, Berlin 2000, p. 554.

ⁱⁱ Ernst Mandel, “Trotsky's conception of self-organization and the vanguard party,” in *Quatrième Internationale*, 36, 35–49 (1989).

ⁱⁱⁱ This is Tariq Ali's summary of Lenin's position on the issue in 1903. Tariq Ali, *The Dilemmas of Lenin* (London, 2017). E-book edition, location 1736.

^{iv} Retrieved on April 9, 2018: <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2016/04/25/state-and-nation-an-interview-with-neil-davidson/>

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- ^v <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2016/04/25/state-and-nation-an-interview-with-neil-davidson/>
- ^{vi} Retrieved on April 9, 2018: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1909/national-question/ch01.htm>
- ^{vii} See Federal Statistical Office of Germany figures for numbers of German citizens eligible to vote at the September 2017 elections. Retrieved on April 14, 2018: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bundestagswahl_2017
For numbers of non-German adults ineligible to vote, see statement made by the Berlin-Mitte municipal authority on September 11, 2017. Retrieved on April 14, 2018:
<https://www.rbb24.de/politik/wahl/bundestag/beitraege/symbolwahl-fuer-nicht-wahlberechtigte-zur-bundestagswahl.html>
- ^{viii} Retrieved on April 16, 2018 from: <http://blog.whatscotlandthinks.org/2014/09/voted-yes-voted/>
- ^{ix} See PDF accessible on the “Download the Computer Tables”-link on the Ipsos-Mori Poll web page. Retrieved on April 16, 2018 at: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/small-lead-no-referendum-result-still-looks-extremely-close>
- ^x Neil Davidson, “Why Scotland Should Vote Yes,” in *Jacobin*, September 12, 2014. Retrieved on April 16, 2018 at: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/09/why-scotland-should-vote-yes>
- ^{xi} Quoted from comments made by Allan Armstrong of the Radical Independence Campaign, in a debate with Alan Mackinnon of the Red Paper Collective, on Left Unity website. Retrieved on April 16, 2018: <http://leftunity.org/the-scottish-independence-debate/>
- ^{xii} Simon Johnson, “Britain's enemies will 'exploit Scottish independence to cut UK power'” in *The Telegraph*, October 17, 2012. Retrieved on April 16, 2018:
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/scotland/9616006/Britains-enemies-will-exploit-Scottish-independence-to-cut-UK-power.html>
- ^{xiii} A report in the anti-independence *Express* newspaper on October 15, 2012, proposed a figure of “£20billion to £25billion.” Retrieved on April 16, 2018: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/352178/25bn-to-remove-Trident-from-Scotland>
- ^{xiv} Sinead Dunn, “Review: Cat Boyd & Jenny Morrison’s “Scottish Independence – A Feminist Response,” August 24, 2014, in *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*. Retrieved on April 16, 2018: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article33663>
- ^{xv} Rosa Luxemburg, *Arbeiterrevolution 1905/06. Polnische Texte*, edited and translated by Holger Politt (Berlin, 2015), pp. 316-317 and p. 320-321.
- ^{xvi} See *Daily Telegraph*, from April 29, 2015. Retrieved on April 26, 2018:
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/SNP/11570769/SNP-rise-in-three-charts.html>
- ^{xvii} Lyn Jones, “Letters: Labour in Scotland” in *London Review of Books*, January 4, 2018. Retrieved on April 26, 2018: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n01/letters>