

Rosa Luxemburg's Advice to the Socialist Movement

By Julia Killet (28.04.2018)

What advice would Rosa Luxemburg give to the left today in the face of a global shift to the right? Paul Frölich, her comrade in arms and trustee of her estate asked that question even 79 years ago. At that time, Frölich lived in exile in Paris, trying to offer answers and solutions to the socialist movement in times of National Socialism and Stalinism in his biography *Rosa Luxemburg. Gedanke und Tat*¹ published in 1939 (published in English in 1940 as *Rosa Luxemburg. Her life and work*). In my presentation I want to speak about the conclusions he came to then.

Notes on the life and work of Paul Frölich

Paul Frölich² was born in 1884 in Neusellerhausen near Leipzig. He was a member of the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany), wrote for numerous social democratic newspapers and joined the "Bremer Linksradikale" (Radical Left of Bremen) in 1914. In 1919, he was elected to the Central Committee and later became a member of the Reichstag. Since the 1920s, he consistently pursued the policy of a united front of KPD (Communist Party of Germany) and SPD. He continued to do so even while he led the SAPD³ in exile in Paris together with Jacob Walcher. Both argued for a German popular front, but were fundamentally different in their political outlook⁴: Frölich criticized the Soviet Union under Stalin⁵ and argued against joining the war against the National Socialists, while Walcher tried to see something positive in the Soviet power despite the show trials in Moscow and the Hitler-Stalin-Pact and was in favor of supporting the war against Nazi Germany.

Looking to Rosa Luxemburg for answers

His biography *Rosa Luxemburg. Gedanke und Tat* was published in 1939 by 'Éditions Nouvelles Internationales', the publisher in exile of the 'Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund'⁶. He was

¹ Frölich, Paul: *Rosa Luxemburg: Gedanke und Tat*. Éditions Nouvelles Internationales, Paris, 1939 / *Rosa Luxemburg. Her life and work*. Translated by Edward Fitzgerald. Victor Gollancz Ltd. Gollancz, London, 1940 / Oetinger: Hamburg, 1949 / 3. Ed. Europäische Verlagsanstalt Frankfurt am Main, 1967 (revised and edited by Rose Frölich. With an afterword by Iring Fetscher) / 4. Ed. Ibid. 1973 / Dietz: Berlin, 1990 (new edition with an afterword by Klaus Kinner). Other translations: Hebrew 1942, Serbo-Croatian 1954, Slovenian 1955, French 1965 [among others]. Here 1990.

² For a biography of Paul Frölich see: Hermann Weber, Andreas Herbst (2008) (eds.): *Deutsche Kommunisten. Biographisches Handbuch 1918 bis 1945*. Frölich, Paul. 2. Edition, Karl Dietz Verlag, Berlin, p. 271f.

³ Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands (Socialist Worker's Party of Germany). Often referred to as Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei (SAP).

⁴ Cf. Brandt, Willy (1982): *Links und frei. Mein Weg 1930–1950*. Hoffmann & Campe Verlag, Hamburg, p. 189f.

⁵ In their introduction to Frölich's "1789", unknown editors wrote of his view of Stalin: Soon after Lenin's death he realized [...] that the policy of Russian communists under Stalin's leadership did not lead to socialism, not to greater freedom and equality, but to a totalitarian and bureaucratic rule. He took up the fight against that policy and remained its implacable opponent." Frölich, Paul (1957): *1789. Die große Zeitwende. Von der Bürokratie des Absolutismus zum Parlament der Revolution*. Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Frankfurt am Main, p. VIII. See also: (the above-mentioned) Frölich, Paul: *Zur Stalin-Legende*. SPD-Landesverband Bayern (ed.). Munich. There, Frölich writes about Stalin: "The myth was deliberately constructed through forgery, suppression and fabrication of documents, through coerced lies of eyewitnesses who had told the truth before, through the appropriation of the deeds and achievements of the deceased, through the methodical destruction of all writings on the history of the party that predated the myth. And through the deliberate killing of almost all persons who know the truth from their own experience!" (p. 6).

⁶ The 'Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund' (International Socialist Militant League) was an independent party, which had emerged in 1926 from the 'Internationaler Jugendbund' (International Youth League) founded

free to do his work for a year thanks to the financial support of left-wing publisher Victor Gollancz, who published the biography in London in 1940 in his series “Left Book Club edition”. Within a short period of time, the English edition was ordered 20,000 times.

Paul Frölich wrote the biography mostly from memory, as he had lost important source material during his escape. However, he was familiar with Rosa Luxemburg’s writing, having been commissioned to edit her complete works together with Clara Zetkin and Adolf Warski by the KPD from 1923. Of the nine planned volumes, only three were published. After Paul Frölich’s expulsion from the KPD as a supposed ‘right-wing dissenter’, the editing project was canceled in 1928.

In his biography, Frölich aimed to: “Present a complete picture of her thoughts and actions on the basis of her own views. Work out Rosa Luxemburg’s thoughts as clearly and distinctly as possible.” (8). As his target audience he named “active socialists with an interest in theoretical and tactical problems” (8). In his opinion, there would have been a renaissance of Rosa Luxemburg within the international labor movement. He named two reasons for this: First, the shock felt by socialists over the victory of Hitler’s fascism⁷ and second, the developments in the Soviet Union⁸ under Stalin. Both historical events would have prompted Socialists to look to Rosa Luxemburg for answers about the causes of these events. Frölich wrote:

“In those times of decline, Rosa Luxemburg’s old fellow campaigners became more and more aware of how much the absence of her advice, her leadership and her example was impacting the movement. [...] It was to be examined how Rosa Luxemburg’s thought and her tactical teachings in particular could be made useful under the current, fundamentally changed conditions.” (9)

Paul Frölich takes two different approaches to demonstrate Rosa Luxemburg’s thoughts as potential advice to the socialist movement. First, he presents her own thought and actions as exemplary and second, he deals with the contents of her policies that are useful to the progress of the movement. Four of these central points will now be presented in more detail:

1. Freedom of thought and expression

in 1917 as part of the SPD. The League was founded by Leonard Nelson, a professor of philosophy. It was based in theory on the teachings of Immanuel Kant and Jakob Friedrich Fries and aimed to put their thought into practice. The League had about 300 members. Among those who wrote for the party organ *Der Funke* (*The Spark*) was Rosa Luxemburg. In 1932, numerous intellectuals such as Albert Einstein, Kurt Hiller, Erich Kästner, Käthe Kollwitz, Heinrich Mann, Ernst Toller and Arnold Zweig supported the League’s call for a cooperation of KPD and SPD. The circle became known for its antifascist resistance from their exile in Paris. Cf. https://www.fes.de/archiv/adsd_neu/inhalt/bestand_andere/ijb.htm (accessed on: 03.01.218).

⁷ Frölich writes: “The victory of Hitler’s barbarism shows with brutal clarity that Rosa Luxemburg’s words of warning [Socialism or Barbarism, author’s note] had not just been a rhetorical phrase. The destruction of the labor movement, the atomization of the socialist classes, the book burnings, the stifling of intellectual life in the nation, the atrocities of the concentration camps, the extermination of whole parts of the population, the complete domination of society by the state apparatus, the total war leading to an inevitable defeat with its terrible consequences – all this was the materialization of barbarism.” (12)

⁸ Frölich writes: “In the development towards barbarism, the diminishing socialist hopes for the future were perhaps the most dangerous phenomenon. The events in Russia, where the revolution had previously strengthened these hopes, were now even more crushing for the international socialist movement. The withering of democratic institutions in Russia, the domination of the people by an omnipotent bureaucracy, the murder of Lenin’s comrades in arms and finally the pact with Hitler allowed only those willing to give up their critical thinking to believe in the Russian state’s socialist policy.” (12)

First, Frölich points to Rosa Luxemburg's free and independent thought and her capacity for self-criticism. These elements of her personality are according to Frölich indispensable for the political movement. He clarifies this taking her undogmatic treatment of Marxism as an example.

"For her, Marxism was not a theoretical template for the solution of all questions at all times. She rather challenged herself to examine the process of economic upheaval with its consequences for the interests, views, and aims of the political action of social groups anew at every step of its development [...]" (76)⁹

According to Frölich, Rosa Luxemburg saw no area of research as completed, but kept examining them from new angles. She also repeatedly re-evaluated her own positions and adapted them to new political and societal circumstances (cf. 14). She also demanded these capabilities from those around her in her political life and those whose causes she supported, Frölich continues: "For her, an always alert and critical mind was the lifeblood of the socialist movement and the first prerequisite of collective action." (9)

Rosa Luxemburg had understood even mistakes as an opportunity for the socialist movement. Frölich quotes Luxemburg: "Missteps made by an actually revolutionary labor movement are historically unimaginably fertile and more valuable than the infallibility of the best of central committees." (121)

Rosa Luxemburg had therefore seen freedom of speech, organization and the press as fundamental for the political system. Frölich makes clear that Rosa Luxemburg as a democratic socialist saw these basic liberties as necessary conditions for a socialist society (cf. 311ff).

2. Independent struggle for political power

Paul Frölich sees the year 1914 as a turning point in Rosa Luxemburg's thinking. Before, she had assumed that the failure of capitalism would lead directly to socialism, as she had described in her work *Akkumulation des Kapitals (The Accumulation of Capital)*. Since the end of World War I, however, she had realized that the catastrophes a capitalist society is plunged into did not guarantee on their own that capitalism would be succeeded by socialism. (Cf. 11) Frölich points out that in her work *Krise der Sozialdemokratie (The Crisis in the German Social-Democracy)* she condensed this reminder in the slogan "Socialism or Barbarism". From then on, she had emphasized the independent struggle of the masses more than before. He quotes Rosa Luxemburg: "If the working class does not find the strength to liberate itself, all of society and the working class with it may consume itself in its destructive fighting." (11)

For Rosa Luxemburg, the starting point for the liberation of society from capitalism and with it militarism, war, and imperialism had been the international solidarity of workers with its united and powerful stance (cf. 216).

Frölich points out repeatedly that for Rosa Luxemburg, the movement had the highest importance. The party only played a subordinate role for her. The party leadership had the duty to execute the will of the majority and to use its deeper understanding to influence decision-making, but not to tyrannically force its will onto the organization (cf. 120f).

⁹ Page numbers refer to Frölich (1990).

Because of this tenet, she had seen the place of the party in parliament in the opposition. To stress this position, Frölich quotes from an article by Rosa Luxemburg from 1899 about the French socialists joining the reactionary bourgeois cabinet:

“The representatives of the working class can only join the bourgeois government without betraying their role under one condition: to take control over it and to transform it into the government of the ruling working class. [...] Within a bourgeois society, the social democrats are by their nature predestined for the role of an opposition party, they may only act as a *governing* party over the ashes of the bourgeois state” (95)

From there, Frölich made the connection to his present and criticizes the disregard of this basic principle leading to the rise of National Socialism after the Weimar Republic. Frölich writes: “Thirty-two years later, as a result of a policy following Millerand’s template on German ground, appeared – Hitler!” (98)

Rosa Luxemburg had seen the path to seizing political power in the combination of the daily political struggle and the revolution (cf. 82). According to Frölich, this was the guiding principle on which Rosa Luxemburg based all of her thought and action. It was necessary to look towards taking power with every political action rather than use actions for short-term goals.

Rosa Luxemburg saw mass strike as the political tool for taking power. Frölich describes how particularly after the Russian revolution of 1905, she insisted both SPD and unions include mass strike into their platforms as a legitimate tool of the struggle. She prioritized this tool over armed fighting and terror, even if she did not rule them out in the political struggle. According to Frölich, Rosa Luxemburg rather saw mass strike as the “typical weapon of the proletariat, the strike, the strike of millions, not longer just for wages and bread, but for large political aims.” (167) Despite short-lived but serious consideration, SPD and unions decided in 1906 to renounce political strikes.

3. Education for the masses

Referring to her informative writings, her work for the party school and her numerous public speeches in front of the masses, Frölich illustrates how important education was for Rosa Luxemburg. Frölich describes as exemplary how deeply and comprehensively she first educated herself, how she analyzed her present in detail to base her strategy and tactics on that analysis. Frölich writes: “Rosa Luxemburg was always striving towards synthesis, towards the final step of understanding.” (31) In the end, this led Frölich to the title of his biography *Gedanke und Tat*. Frölich writes:

“In a politician she demanded a scientist’s striving to research the natural laws to by subjecting himself to them control the forces of nature. As an agent of history, she followed the tenet: In the beginning there was the deed! A deed that must be determined by an understanding of the historical process.” (78)

For the education of the masses, Rosa Luxemburg had seen various media as indispensable. First, a political magazine as a vehicle of enlightenment, for the organization of resistance during the war and for forming a revolutionary front (cf. 267). Second, agitation, which she directed specifically at certain groups. For instance, public speeches in rural areas were particularly important to her. Frölich quotes Luxemburg: “Agitation is most needed in the country. Not to recruit rural laborers and farmers for an imminent militant fight, but to win over their minds for socialism, light the fire of rebellion in their hearts, and wake their will to liberation.” (141). She had also addressed her

message directly to soldiers. Socialist agitation was to pull a part of the military onto their own side and make another part doubtful, thereby breaking down the army's strength and discipline (cf. 141). When the SPD drifted more and more to the right before and during World War I and the left opposition, apart from a few people, was dwindling, Rosa Luxemburg had increasingly spoken to the youth: Frölich writes: "She puts her hope on the young generation, the best and brightest of which had educated themselves with her works [...]." (228)

Frölich describes how Rosa Luxemburg aimed at giving the masses a solid foundation that prepared them for their further independent education. She wanted to create that foundation because she thought that in the revolution, education would develop an independent dynamic. Frölich writes: "She repeatedly pointed out that in times when revolutionary tension is highest, the mental development of the masses can make great leaps forward once they really are in motion." (365)

4. Early thoughts on a socialist society

Paul Frölich writes the focus of Rosa Luxemburg shifted the focus of her writing more and more to how a socialist society might actually be like rather than just how a successful transition to socialism might happen. For Rosa Luxemburg, socialism had not just been a hope, but the aim of an irresistible will to act (cf. 244). Frölich emphasizes the Utopian dimensions she thought in, which were valuable and necessary for her revolutionary work. Frölich writes:

"Then, there is an unusual capacity for imagination. She directs this towards Marxist thinking while leaving it free to push forward uninhibited. It is the source of the creative realism she demonstrated again and again." (244)

Frölich quotes Rosa Luxemburg's manifesto of the Spartakusbund (Spartacus League):

"The essence of socialist society consists in the fact that the great laboring mass ceases to be a dominated mass, but rather, makes the entire political and economic life its own life and gives that life a conscious, free, and autonomous direction." (15)

The aim of socialism according to Rosa Luxemburg was a humanistic one, a society without class differences, in which people make their own destiny in a community without being patronized. Socialism as she understood was democracy perfected, the free development of the individual personality within the collective work of all for the good of all (cf. 14f).

Closing remarks

Paul Frölich's political home was on the left wing of the labor movement. His biography of Rosa Luxemburg is impressive because he not just had an exceptional knowledge of her work, but also wrote from the perspective of her contemporary and active comrade in arms. As a champion of the united front policy and because of his critical view of the Soviet Union under Stalin, he could write his view free from the ideological conflicts within the communist movement at the time. He portrays Rosa Luxemburg as a democratic socialist who saw freedom of speech, assembly, organization and the press as foundations of a socialist society. It is this political aim that Frölich presents from different perspectives as counsel for the socialist movement. However, he himself makes no attempt to apply Rosa Luxemburg's thoughts to the present. He rather shows how Rosa Luxemburg looked to the socialist history and present to find insights for the future. He connects this with her political demand for the independent taking of power. With his account of Rosa Luxemburg's life and work, Frölich aims to emphasize that the present can only be changed through one's own initiative and

strength. The ideas and suggestions of Rosa Luxemburg outlined by him are only meant to serve as inspiration. He looks to the future with hope and concludes his biography with the sentence: "The triumph of barbarism will be halted. The flow of the Acheron will start again. From the spirit of Rosa Luxemburg, victors will emerge." (377)

Julia Killet has been working as regional director of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Bavaria / the Kurt Eisner Verein. She studied literary and political science. She is currently writing her dissertation on the portrayal of Luxemburg in prose writing.