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Review and Prospect of Chinese Study on Rosa Luxemburg

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the history of research on Rosa Luxemburg in China and concludes the characteristics of recent study. Although the study on Rosa Luxemburg has already made great progress, it still has many shortcomings and limitations. First, influenced by Western Marxism, the study contains a trend of over abstraction and modernization of the thought of Rosa Luxemburg; second, it may be far from reality to regard historical materialism as a totality method; additionally, the study is not sufficient in cognizing the limitation of Rosa Luxemburg's thought. After elaborating these problems, this article will try to point out the possible prospects of the study on Rosa Luxemburg in the future.

KEYWORDS

Rosa Luxemburg; review;
historical materialism;
revolution

Introduction

Rosa Luxemburg is widely recognized as an extraordinary female revolutionist in the Polish and German socialist movements. She is also regarded as one of the most brilliant theorists and leaders in the left-wing of the Second International. She devoted her entire life to the career of revolution, endured many hardships, was imprisoned many times and finally bravely sacrificed herself to the liberation of the proletariat.

Marxism and idealism coexist in her thought. She insisted on the principle of democracy from the standpoint of revolution, which was reflected in her disputes with different people of her time. On opposing reformism, she blamed Bernstein for giving up the final target of revolution; she criticized Lenin for disobeying the organizational principle of democracy; she was against Kautsky for confining the activity of the Social Democratic Party only to parliamentary and economic struggles. She spoke highly of the Russian Revolution, but disagreed with what the Soviet regime did afterwards. When World War I began, she pointed out, the world war was just a trick for imperialism to put off the class struggle, and regarded it as the sign of the death of capitalism (Luxemburg 2012, 207). These opinions seemed to contradict one another, but were not mutually exclusive in her writings. The continuing characteristics of her thought, being both radical and democratic at the same time, ran throughout her life. Moreover, just the complexity of her thought and her being inopportune to her times made the evaluation of Rosa Luxemburg, as a Marxism theorist, so controversial and strongly affected by politics. These in turn also shaped the fate of study on Rosa Luxemburg.

The development of academic history is never a straight road. People's knowledge on one issue is always moving forward in twists and turns or even in misunderstandings. However, the development itself has its immanent logic. The study results of the predecessors profoundly shaped the successors. The successors' cognition on the same issue either partially affirms and develops the predecessors' study or negates, even overcorrects them. In general, any study on history is inevitably influenced by its own time.

Review of the study on Luxemburg in China

In 1921, Rosa Luxemburg was first introduced to the Chinese as a proletariat revolutionist. On October 12, one of the founding fathers of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Li Da, published an article on the supplement of *Republic Daily*, *Comments on Women*, named "Introducing Several Female Social Revolutionist," in which he wrote, "Rosa and Clara are the stars of international proletariat women" (Li 1980, 109). He introduced four of her writings, and sketched the general picture of her thought. In 1922, he published *Biography of Liebknecht* and the *History of Women's Rights Movement*, in which he spoke highly of Rosa Luxemburg as the "pioneer of communist women activity" (170). Since then, activities commemorating Luxemburg and Liebknecht have not stopped. Sometimes Luxemburg was propagandized as a firm revolutionist to call on the communists to learn from her. Sometimes she appeared as an internationalist and anti-war soldier, for Chinese practical needs of resisting the Japanese invaders. Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Luxemburg's thought was primarily introduced only out of political need. The academic study had not started yet.

After the establishment of the PRC, China started to translate and publish Luxemburg's writings, making it possible for Chinese readers to know her ideas directly. However, the evaluation of Luxemburg was seriously affected by Stalinist, official Soviet opinions. To make matters worse, the domestic trend of thought in China was going towards extreme-leftism. Therefore, for a long time, the objective and profound study of Luxemburg could not have truly been started. The study was restricted to give general and empty positive evaluation on specific issues, such as her revolutionary standpoint and her opposition to revisionism. However, most of her original and creative opinions were overlooked. Rosa Luxemburg was at most a female revolutionist, who made mistakes.

With the end of the 10-year Cultural Revolution, especially after the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of CCP, China's social science study started to revive. The study on critical figures and events of international communist history had also come into a new age. In the 1980s, Chinese study on Rosa Luxemburg made a great breakthrough. Specifically, in 1983, a famous Japanese specialist on Rosa Luxemburg study, Narihiko Ito, was invited to come to China and give a lecture on the international research situation of Rosa Luxemburg. Afterwards, he established connections with Chinese scholars. From then on, the Center of International Communist History in the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau began comprehensive study on Luxemburg.

During the 1980s, domestic academia continued to give positive evaluations of Luxemburg's critique of Bernstein and militarism, and her supportive standpoint on the Russian Revolution. After translating and introducing her two important passages, "On the Organizational Issues of Russian Social Democratic Party" (Luxemburg 1981a) and "On Russian Revolution" (Luxemburg 1981b), people started to get in touch with the most sensitive

parts of her thought, which is her critique towards the organizational principle of Bolshevik and the Soviet regime after revolution. In these two passages, she explicated her opinions about democracy in socialism. The democratic issues, which inevitably evolved in divergence from Lenin, have evoked academia's long-lasting interest after World War II in the worldwide scope. Therefore, she was also regarded as one of the most profound and radical Marxist thinkers.

Chinese scholars' main opinion on this issue was the fact that the difference between Lenin and Luxemburg lay in their different backgrounds and situations. Rosa Luxemburg made mistakes in many aspects for she neglected the specific historical conditions of Russia. Her critique is partial and improper because most of her judgments came from the experience of Social Democratic Party of Germany (Li 1983). But the scholars were also generally aware of the valuable aspects of Luxemburg's thinking: she emphasized the inner-party democracy and the originality of the masses. Her opinions on democracy in socialism were very important and penetrating in the long-term, which also had critically theoretical and practical significance (Cheng 1982, 1981). From today's perspective, the study from the 1980s had many limitations, but it made great progress for having entered the forbidden studying area, which in some degree was related to the ethos of the time. In the 1980s, various new thoughts were broadly introduced to China, which had tremendous impact on people's old values. Under this circumstance, a relatively objective study was possible. Additionally, in the 1980s, academia started to pay attention to the Luxemburg's discussions on nation issues, imperialism and capital accumulation (Cai 1983, 1985; Liu 1984; Xu 1984).

By the 1990s, under the background of the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the critique of Luxemburg towards the Russian Revolution and her suggestions on party-building seemed more persuasive. In addition, it is more and more necessary to reevaluate Luxemburg for China's increasing needs of establishing and enhancing democracy in socialism. However, at that time, people generally lost confidence in Marxism and socialism. By contrast, the public interest turned to liberalism. Hence, the research findings on Luxemburg were much less than the 1980s. But with the acceleration of globalization, some scholars had already begun relevant research on Luxemburg's theory of capital accumulation (Ma 1992; Feng 1999).

The present situation, problems and the future of research on Luxemburg

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, ideological prejudices and official opinions have been replaced with more neutral and objective studies. The related scholars were more open-minded, broadening and deepening the research on Luxemburg. Economists started to pay attention to her theory of capital accumulation and her opinions about the relationship between developed and underdeveloped countries, which is the theoretical source of the "world system theory" and the "dependence theory"; political scientists began to reflect on the full picture of Luxemburg's political philosophy. The scholars of philosophy paid more attention to the significance of her methodology, and the role of Luxemburg in the history of philosophy. They pointed out the inseparable connection between Western neo-Marxism and Luxemburg. Some scholars also took notice of the similarities between Rosa Luxemburg and other thinkers in the history of ideologies, such as Hannah Arendt. Other scholars noticed her aesthetic opinions and comments

on literature. In addition, there emerged many theses and doctoral dissertations about different aspects of the thought of Luxemburg, including national self-determination, social revolution, democracy in socialism, methodology of totality, theory of capital accumulation and contribution to the liberation of women (Liu 2007; Zhang 2008, 2011; Zhao 2011; Wang 2011). In conclusion, the study of Luxemburg in the new age was overwhelmingly diversified.

As to the treatise on Luxemburg, Cheng Renqian from Fudan University published two books, *The Affirmation and Negation of the World System Theory* (2004) and *The Study on Luxemburg's Capital Accumulation Theory* (2009). Professor Cheng traced from classical political economics, vulgar economics, Marxist economics and German Historical School to Wallerstein's world system theory. He examined Luxemburg's opinions in history and development of political economics, and pointed out her shortcomings. Meanwhile, Dr. Xiong Min from Zhongnan University of Economics published her doctoral dissertation, *The Logic and History of Capital Globalization: The Study on Luxemburg's Theory of Capital Accumulation* (2011). She conducted thorough research founded on the logical prerequisite of Luxemburg's economic theory. These treatises make profound and instructive contributions to the research on Luxemburg.

On the aspect of translation and publication of Luxemburg's own works, in October 2001, Guizhou People's Publishing House published *On Russian Revolution and Letters* translated by Yin Xuyi, Fu Weici and Guo Yidun. In May 2007, Flower City Publishing House republished *Rosa Luxemburg's Letters and Papers from Prison*. These translations helped and created conditions for further studies on Luxemburg's thought and life. In addition, the People's Publishing House published *Selected Works of Luxemburg* which was edited by Li Zongyu in 2012. Other than some of her most popular works, it included for the first time her newly found manuscript on the Russian Revolution (Luxemburg 2012) before her death, which has aroused widespread attention since its discovery. The article was not found in the archives of the Polish Social Democratic Party until the 1990s. Afterwards, it was translated into German and English. Li Zongyu referred to the two versions and translated it into Chinese in 2005.

During this period, two international academic meetings made contributions to facilitating Chinese research on Luxemburg. The first conference was held by the International Socialism Institute of Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, International Luxemburg Association and German Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. In total, 32 scholars from nine countries and 40 Chinese scholars participated in this academic meeting held in Guangzhou. This meeting discussed Rosa Luxemburg's democracy in socialism. Western scholars universally emphasized mass democracy and its value in parliamentary struggles, while Chinese scholars unexceptionally stressed the importance of her ideas on inner-party democracy and its significance in modern times. Another meeting held by the Marxist Philosophy Institute of Wuhan University followed in March 2006. More than 60 scholars from over 10 countries took part in the meeting. This time, participants paid more attention to Luxemburg's theory of capital accumulation and political economics study. An Italian scholar Riccardo Bellofiore, a British scholar Jan Toporowski, a Dutch scholar Machael R. Kratke and others deeply analyzed Luxemburg's views on the theory of capital accumulation.

The depth and scope of Chinese research on Luxemburg in the last 30 years have extremely improved compared with the past. From the 1980s to the 1990s, the study had focused more on the translation and the introduction of the main works of Luxemburg,

especially her critique on Lenin and the Russian Revolution, which had already made great progress and altered the out-fashioned opinions negating her thoughts entirely. Also, it helped to lay the foundation for further study. But from today's view, it is still lacking in many ways. Confined by the political climate, the scholars all very cautiously and mildly alleviated the difference between Luxemburg and Lenin. Some scholars subjectively narrowed the gap between them. Others held a wishful view that Luxemburg corrected herself and moved closer to Lenin's opinions in her later years. These interpretations recast Luxemburg in the molds of Lenin, which was understandable at that time, but has many limitations today.

In this new century, the study on Luxemburg progressed to new grounds. As to the relationship with Lenin, opinions became more open than that of the past. Many scholars had cast away the banal ways of treating and evaluating Luxemburg from the standpoint of Lenin. They were inclined to base their work on history and conduct neutral and objective research on Luxemburg. The scope of research had been broadened, from the propaganda of her revolutionary stories to the study of her thought and theory, from the traditional sphere of political study to philosophical and economic research. The old questions have not been fully answered yet, but new ones have appeared. There are still many potential areas for research in this field. Predictably, more valuable study results will be achieved in the future.

At present, there are some characteristics and trends in the Chinese study of Luxemburg. Also, there exist some shortcomings and weaknesses, which to some degree should be overcome in future study.

First, there exists a trend of modernization, abstraction and Westernization in the study of Luxemburg. The current scholars pay more attention to the interpretation of its modern significance. It is very popular to relate Luxemburg to modern Western ideological trends. And it no doubt will help to popularize Luxemburg, but it is also misleading. Although Luxemburg had many divergences from social democrats of the Second International, she still lived in that age and shared the same experiences and theoretical background with most of her colleagues. So when scholars tabbed her as the later Western Marxist, and considered her thought as against economic determinism, they had forgotten the context of her thought. As a left-wing thinker, what she criticized of the mainstream of the Second International should only be understood in light of her strong belief in the inevitability of the collapse of capitalist economy and the revolutionary prediction of the proletariat. So her similarity with the Second International was in fact much more than their differences. But, to some extent, the latter is overestimated by contemporary scholars.

Besides, there is another practice to compare Luxemburg with Western liberal thinkers such as Hannah Arendt. Luxemburg indeed paid attention to democratic issues, but the norm was deeply rooted in the classical Marxist definitions of the essence of socialism. As a consequence, she was against reformism and Lenin's elite's inculcation to the masses at the same time. She held the view that "freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently" (Luxemburg 1999, chapter 6). She hoped that the proletariat could construct their own self-consciousness, obtain the ability of self-management and show the spirit of originality during the revolution, but it does not come from the belief in the abstractly created equality and freedom. On the contrary, it comes from the understanding and confidence of the class-consciousness and creativity of the masses resulting from the basic contradiction of capitalism. The academic study

should not be satisfied with explaining the kinship among thinkers by simply constructing their similarities, but should put the thinkers back in their times, and notice the mutual construction and generation between history and thinkers. This is the most proper and respectful way to comprehend the rationality of her thought and appraise its limitation. It is probably true that Luxemburg did not want to be the founder of the so-called Western Marxism, or associated with liberal thinkers. Compared with that, she might be most willing to be called the best student of Marx.

Second, many scholars of Marxist philosophy paid attention to the immanent totality of Luxemburg's thought nowadays. Lukács once considered Luxemburg's thought as a result of exercising the methodology of totality. This view deeply affected Chinese scholars. For example, Professor He Ping (2006) and Professor Chen Xueming (2006) both took efforts to elaborate a similar point of view. There were even doctoral dissertations specialized in discussing the totality methodology in Luxemburg's thought.

Marx's method is surely taking the society as a whole to understand, but Marx did not devote himself to an exquisite and abstract concept system, but insisted on taking all the past, reality and future that human beings experienced as a process of natural history. To this extent, Marx may be called more an economist and social historian than a philosopher and political scientist. It is more proper to call the historical materialism a grand historical view than a methodology of totality, in which the society of mankind was examined through the great changes of history. Luxemburg naturally inherited her mentor's basic standpoint while doing analysis of history and reality. This character is more obviously embodied in her coherent theory. Therefore, an over-emphasis on the totality character of her thought might not accord with the facts.

Third, the limitations of Luxemburg's thinking were neglected. Recent study focused more on the contributions and values of her thought, and explicated more on its practical significance, which was after all a great step forward in academic study. However, its limitations were to some degree overlooked. Most of the criticism came from Lenin's perspective, or served practical political demands. However, there were not enough profound and precise studies on Luxemburg, which would be related to the general background of international socialism, using the method of historical materialism. In the opinion of the author, Luxemburg's condemnation of the Russian Revolution's mistakes was critical and penetrating, but she neglected the economic and social basis of Russia, because its material conditions were severely constrained in the sense that an independent proletariat mass revolution seemed improbable. Besides, she alleged that world revolutions would help the Russian Revolution to get over the deficiency of material conditions, and that was why she condemned the SPD's (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) betrayal of revolution. However, she could not estimate that revolution was no longer possible in the center of capitalism. Additionally, her scheme of autonomous socialism by spontaneous mass democracy lacks feasibility under the complicated social conditions in modern countries. Therefore, the study on the limitations of Rosa Luxemburg and the complexity of history still requires continued efforts.

Conclusion

As stated above, the author tried to summarize the history of Chinese study on Luxemburg. Despite the gained research results from Chinese study, there are still some possible aspects that deserve further attention.

The first is the mutual construction between Luxemburg's thought and her life. To this point, there has been only one commentary biography of Luxemburg's thought and life, which was written by Cheng Renqian in the 1980s, but many of the comments and opinions at the time are outdated. It is still very meaningful to restore the full appearance of Rosa Luxemburg.

The second is the historical study of the thought of Rosa Luxemburg. The dilemma of Luxemburg's thought was due to the contradiction between practice and theory of socialism. In Western Europe, the self-coordinating ability of capitalism had been enhanced, and the increasing power of parliamentary reformism made it unnecessary to appeal to violent revolution in practical politics. Meanwhile, in Soviet Russia, Lenin remolded Marx's proletariat revolutionary theory in order to suit his practical needs, for the proletariat in underdeveloped countries could not generate class-consciousness spontaneously or start revolutions on their own. However, Lenin's successful practice finally sacrificed democracy as the price. Then Luxemburg's revolutionary and radical thought were struck by the realities of both the West and the East at the same time. For the West, the revolution was put off forever, and Luxemburg's insistence on the revolution can only be seen as intentionally destroying social democratism; for the East, the premature revolution altered the initial conditions and the result of Marx's revolutionary theory. And Lenin's success of revolution legitimized all his means, which made Luxemburg's standpoint on the spontaneity of the mass fragile and weak. The new historical conditions disconnected the analyzing method of historical materialism and the final direction of proletariat revolution. This was precisely the challenge of reality that Luxemburg's thought had to face, which was also the most serious test and dilemma for Marx's theory. The study on these problems has not been paid enough attention, and there remains a lot of room for further study.

The third is the study on the spontaneous socialist tradition founded by Luxemburg. This tradition is a variant of orthodox Marxism in different times and different environment. Making clear this thread of thoughts is helpful to understand many dilemmas of theoretical and practical problems in the history of socialism, which is also conducive to the exploration of socialism's future development. But in this aspect, the study is still not enough.

Finally, the author bravely brings up a proposal of whether or not Chinese can edit a complete works of Luxemburg? If China can have such a complete picture of Luxemburg, it will be very helpful to further study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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