

When Tussy met Rosa: two Jewesses going ahead

Writers of politics with a passion for history often wish they could be a fly on the wall when watching their subjects in action. What would I have given to hang around Eleanor Marx and Rosa Luxemburg when they shaped the Second International, and modern European social democracy that arose from it. I use the concept of meeting on three tiers. First, the actual events in which they met; further, the intersections between their work; and last, their meeting in our own minds and hearts; the intersections between their legacy and how we narrate them today.

Eleanor and Rosa had much in common. First, they were both internationalists through and through. Unnecessary to repeat in this room Rosa's monumental work in critique of international elements of capitalism, elucidated in her seminal work *Accumulation of Capital*; Eleanor was declared upon her birth, so tells us Rachel Holmes in a powerful—and indeed game changing—new biography of Eleanor Marx, *Global Citizen* when Karl Marx celebrated the birth of his youngest daughter with Wilhelm Liebknecht. (Holmes, 2) Both women were multilingual and much of their work was done around translation; Eleanor was indeed the first translator of *Madame Bovary* into English.

Both women worked tirelessly in the preservation and expansion of Marxist legacy; once again unnecessary to tell you all in this room about 'social reform or revolution', but perhaps more necessary to mention that Eleanor edited her father's *Value, Price and Profit* in 1898 in response to Edward Bernstein's articles. Both women were powerful speakers who drew crowds into the

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struggle easily. Both were also complex human beings; women living in a deeply unequal world (whereas Rosa was of course Dr. Luxemburg, but Eleanor never attended any formal institution- no need to feel too bad for her, since she was home- schooled on the knees of the Capital). Both were deeply charismatic women, who were the centers of socialist circles in their respective societies; both were generous friends, passionate lovers. And of course, one striking resemblance is that they are both famously cat lovers. Am sure the name Mimi invokes familiar references in this room- the protagonist of Rosa's letters as much as her comrades. Eleanor was nicknamed from her childhood, so tells us Rachel Holmes, Tussy; to rhyme, her parents said, with Pussy not Fussy. Cats she adored, fussy she never was.

A word on Rachel Holmes' biography. A major intervention into both left wing historiography, in placing Eleanor in many of her interventions (to which she is not always credited), it is also an intervention in contemporary feminist theory and activism; restoring Eleanor to her position as foremother of socialist- feminism. Holmes' takes head on the contradictions of Eleanor life, and never tries to reduce them to a single narrative. The calling for that comes from Eleanor herself in a letter she sends her sister Laura Lafargue, 1892 " is it not wonderful when you come to look at things squarely in the face, how rarely we seem to practice all the fine things we preach to others?"(Holmes, epigraph). I take on board this calling, and ask we consider Rosa with this in mind, too, as indeed her ongoing, and deeply inspiring editorial project asks to do; not only the romantic bird loving Rosa, whose letters are full of witty puns and dark humor; the sharp economic theorist, political writer and organizer; all those things together. Eleanor 's favorite motto was "Go Ahead" and her legacy is a testimonial of her commitment to do just that: was a major

force in the British Labour movement, founder of the Gas Workers Union, now the GMB, (a union that has more members than all political parties put together). She was a pioneer of Ibsen's plays; indeed in her front room the first ever reading of a Doll's House took place for her 31 birthday (her friend George Bernard Shaw acted opposite her). She was the pioneer of the woman question from a socialist point of view, and died an untimely death, by suicide or murder by her partner Edward Aveling. Both women beg us a more sophisticated reading of the relationship between life and work. As Marx herself tells us in her notes for biography of her father (she was his first biographer): "Marx, the 'Poliker' and Denker' can take his chance, while Marx the man is less likely to fare as well" (Holmes, xviii). Here is the place to ask how Marx the politician fares, in addition to Eleanor the woman, and indeed how Dr. Luxemburg and Rosa would fare, too.

I wonder, to start practically the conversation between Rosa and Tussy, what Rosa would make of this letter sent by Tussy to her uncle Lyon Phillips at the age of 8 "how do you think Poland is getting on? I always hold up a finger for the Poles, these brave little fellows"(Holmes, p. 55).

This historical moment will be invoked, of course, when Rosa speaks in the London Congress of 1896, and takes down argument in favor of socialist support for the independence of Poland, one by one, "From false premises come false conclusions: as if the existence of an independent Poland could deprive Russia of its powers at home or abroad. The restoration of Poland could bring about the downfall of Russian absolutism only if it simultaneously abolished the social basis of the tsardom within Russia itself, i.e., the remains of the old peasant economy and the im-

portance of the tsardom for both the nobility and the bourgeoisie. But of course this is arrant nonsense: it makes no difference – with or without Poland these relations remain unchanged.”

We already see one major difference between the two women, and that is the question of Polish nationalism, and nationalism more broadly within the Marxist framework. Eleanor’s internationalism had within it an ethos for resistance of oppressed nationalities (indeed in the same speech Luxemburg asks why not stand up, then, for Irish independence, and Eleanor does exactly that, most notably in her text from 1884 *the Irish Dynamiters*).

Both women expanded and improved Marx’s theory, without watering it down (Eleanor tackled her friend Bernstein head on after his infamous publications in *Der Neue Zeit*). Dr. Luxemburg’s complex work established how capitalism expands beyond the nation state (though again I do not reduce her theory for one strand only); whereas Eleanor Marx explored the influences of capitalism on the ‘miniatures of all antagonism’ (her father’s words here), *the family*. Her text from 1886 *The Woman Question* (from a socialist point of view) clearly states the principles of socialist-feminism: “The woman question is, first and foremost, "one of economics, and one of organization of society as a whole”. She continues: “Women are the creatures of an organized tyranny of men, as the workers are the creatures of an organized tyranny of idlers”. Eleanor, like their mutual friend Clara Zetkin, stressed the fact that many advocates of the ‘woman question’ focus on the middle classes, and the emphasis on legal elements of inequality, such as suffrage, means that they turn a blind eye to structural elements of oppression which are grounded in the economic infrastructure of society. Patriarchal capitalism creates divisions that lie deeper than struggles focused on legal rights. “And first, a general idea that has to do with all women. The life of

woman does not coincide with that of man. Their lives do not intersect; in many cases do not even touch. Hence the life of the race is stunted". The answer to inequality comes in radical restructuring of society that starts from its economic infrastructure.

However, Holmes argues, the starkest difference between Eleanor and her father lies in their relationship to their Jewishness (Holmes, 351). This personal feature, of course, both Marxses share with Rosa Luxemburg. I pause here to think about this element in both women's biographies and their theories, as well as in how we understand them.

First quote from Tussy: "I am the only one from my family who felt drawn to Jewish people, and particularly to those who are socialistically inclined. My happiest moments are when I am in the East End among Jewish workpeople" (Holmes, 351). Let us note here, with Holmes, that Eleanor's proclamation "I am a Jewess" was made against the backdrop of her father's disengagement with his own Jewishness. Moreover, this proclamation comes in a specific historical context: in 1895 the TUC had passed a resolution calling the British government to control the immigration of alien workers. In response, thousands attended a meeting in the Great Assembly Hall in which Eleanor spoke: "Jews! The English anti-semites have come to the point where the English workers' organization to close England's doors to the poor alien, that is, in the main, to the Jew. You must no longer keep silent" (Holmes, 356).

This affirmation of internationalism brings Eleanor closer to Rosa Luxemburg than may seem at first sight. Consider for instance this refusal to create "socialism in one country" with Rosa Luxemburg's critique of the concept of national economy.

Here is the place to revisit the famous (infamous?) statement Luxemburg makes In a private letter, once receiving because of her Jewish roots (letter to Mathilde Wurm, 1917): “what do you want with this theme of the “special suffering of the Jews”? I am just as much concerned with the poor Blacks in Africa with whose courses the Europeans play catch. ....I have no special place in my heart for the [Jewish] ghetto. I feel at home in the entire world, wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears” (RL letters, 375)

Once again, at first, it seems the difference between the two women is stark. However, let us consider these two statements together. For one woman, Jewishness and its proclamation is a choice. She uses this feature to create a distinction between her and her father, as well as the environment around her that is becoming nationalistic and chauvinistic and indeed antisemitic. For another woman, Jewishness is part of her biography. She uses this fact to create a distinction from chauvinistic readings that will bring her away from internationalism. So, although at first glance the two women’s relationship to their Jewishness is different, it does present more similarities that meet the eye.

(It is necessary to mention here, that Edward Bernstein read Eleanor after her death as “nearly Zionist”. However this statement clearly misses the internationalism that gave rise to the statement- away from any enunciation of ethno- nationalism, and shows Bernstein’s inclinations rather than Eleanor’s own, Holmes argues, 355. )

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Beyond political inclinations, one feature that drew me in my own work to both Dr. Luxemburg and Eleanor Marx is the fact that both women are so much ahead of their time. moreover, they both organized in the present drawing from learning from the wrongs of the past, though their actions were firmly placed in the future. Eleanor kept, in the words of her favorite motto, going ahead. Here is a piece from Tussy's speech on the first May Day : "We have not come to do the work of political parties, but we have come here in the cause of labour, in its own defence, to demand its own rights. I can remember when we came in handfuls of a few dozen to Hyde Park to demand an Eight Hours' Bill, but the dozens have grown to hundreds, and the hundreds to thousands, until we have this magnificent demonstration that fills the park today. We are standing face to face with another demonstration, but I am glad to see that the great masses of the people are on our side. Those of us who have gone through all the worry of the Dock Strike, and especially the Gasworkers' Strike, and have seen the men, women and children stand round us, have had enough of strikes, and we are determined to secure an eight hours' day by legal enactment; unless we do so, it will be taken from us at the first opportunity. We will only have ourselves to blame if we do not achieve the victory which this great day could so easily give us... I am speaking this afternoon not only as a Trade Unionist, but as a Socialist. Socialists believe that the eight hours' day is the first and most immediate step to be taken, and we aim at a time when there will no longer be one class supporting two others, but the unemployed both at the top and at the bottom of society will be got rid of. This is not the end but only the beginning of the struggle; it is not enough to come here to demonstrate in favour of an eight hours' day. We must not be like some Christians who sin for six days and go to church on the seventh, but we must speak for the

cause daily, and make the men, and especially the women that we meet, come into the ranks to help us.” (Holmes, 333).

“The mass strike is the first natural, impulsive form of every great revolutionary struggle of the proletariat and the more highly developed the antagonism is between capital and labour, the more effective and decisive must mass strikes become.”, further,

“Policy must not be formulated in such a way that the masses are always confronted with *faits accomplis*. Above all you must see to it that the press is a sharply honed weapon that cuts away the darkness from the people’s minds. The masses must make themselves heard in order to propel the party ship forward. Then we will be able to face the future confidently. History will do its work. See that you too do your work. (the Political Mass Strike, 1913).

Truly radical thinking, both women, knew, cannot be delimited to actions in the present; our outlooks and visions for the better future are delimited by our constraints in the past and present.

Both women aspired to a future they did not yet know, as Rosa would frame it, “a land of boundless possibilities”; Eleanor Marx referred to her life as ‘the Sequel’ transcending her father’s dialectics.

It is time to draw away from this real-imagined meeting of these two great women. I am left to wonder whether when Rosa met Tussy, and especially when on Tussy’s home-grounds, her beloved London, she treated Rosa to a glass of her idea of happiness, champagne (Eleanor Marx was the first champagne socialist). Whether they discussed cats in addition to socialism? All this we will never know.

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We have seen many political overlaps between the two women, as well as of course distinctions. We have also learnt to not read statements on face value, and consider these two great women's contribution in their historical context and while listening to contradictions within the narratives of their life and work, both, rather than trying to reconcile them. We should give both Marx the woman, and Luxemburg the woman, a better chance to present us with complexities and contradictions. But what is clear is that there is much to be learnt and much to be examined in the legacy of these two politicians, these Jewesses, who were always, in the words of Eleanor's favorite motto, going ahead.

Adler, Georg, Hudis Peter and Laschitza Annelies, *the Letters of Rosa Luxemburg (2013)*, London: Verso.

Rosa Luxemburg, works quoted from Marxists. Org

Rachel Holmes, *Eleanor Marx: A life*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2014)