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On Marxism, Rosa Luxemburg, and Anti-globalization: A Response to Burgmann

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In "The Spectre of the *Manifesto*: Classical Marxism and Its Discontents," Verity Burgmann's central argument is that Classical Marxism's "tendency to be overawed by the dynamism of capital" means that "it cannot succour resistance to globalization."[1] It is a sweeping condemnation, one that immediately requires the reader to ask why it is the role of Classical Marxism to lead the charge against globalization. Given Burgmann's argument that Classical Marxism has been unfit to do this ever since Marx and Engels published *The Communist Manifesto*, we understand that failure has been on the cards ever since they were dealt. Burgmann leaves Classical Marxism eviscerated and bleeding on the ground, its early promise draining away.

Burgmann's analysis is sweeping, multilayered, provocative, and stimulating. She is quite right; Classical Marxism, which she equates with Second International Marxism and *The Communist Manifesto*, has had much to answer for since the collapse of German social democracy at the start of World War I. There is no question, as Burgmann argues, that at the height of anti-globalization activism, anarchism provided "more creative resistance to capitalism" than did Classical Marxism (210). There is also a great deal of truth in her assertion that anarchism "more easily embraces the multitude of

1. Verity Burgmann, "The Spectre of the *Manifesto*: Classical Marxism and Its Discontents," *Labour/Le Travail* 96 (Fall 2025): 193. In subsequent references to Burgmann's essay, page numbers will be cited directly in the text, in parentheses.

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the oppressed under globalization" than does Classical Marxism (209). These are not easy claims to question, let alone refute.

I begin with her caricature of Classical Marxists. Her equation, that the Marxism of the *Communist Manifesto* equals Classical Marxism equals Second International Marxism, is much too neat, a-historically reductionist, and simply wrong in the case of Marxists such as Rosa Luxemburg. I then move to her dismissal of Leninism and Third International Marxism as a "taint" on Second International Marxism (203, 209). This dismissal of Third International Marxism leaves out of her approach the entire history of anti-colonial movements in the Third World, an indispensable forerunner of the anti-globalization movement. Finally, it is necessary to take a closer look at the seemingly irreconcilable purposes of her analysis, the championing of anarchism and the returning of Marxism to its true path.

Burgmann claims that Classical Marxism is the Marxism of the *Communist Manifesto*, which would make Marx a Classical Marxist. Yet she claims that Marx "did not necessarily endorse such an approach" (193). She relies almost entirely on the work of Teodor Shanin in claiming that the "late" Marx is the real Marx, the one who "put new stress on the regressive aspects of capitalism" (197). Burgmann, however, is not really interested in the vast body of more recent work on the "ecological" Marx, by John Bellamy Foster, David Harvey, Michael Löwy, and Kohei Saito, among others. Instead, her target is the Classical Marxists who thought they knew more about Marxism than Marx himself.

Burgmann is not wrong in making this claim, but it is once again taken from Shanin, and it leads her to make sweeping generalizations about Classical Marxists that do not stand up under closer scrutiny. She argues that all three "streams" of Classical Marxism shared an "enthusiasm" for the limitless productive capabilities of capitalism – the streams of Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, and Eduard Bernstein. Burgmann is not wrong in claiming that at the end of the 20th century, it seemed that Marxism would experience "a conceptual resurgence, precisely because its analysis of the world economic system at last seemed so apt" (192). The problem is that it is the "early" Marx of *The Communist Manifesto* who makes the dynamism of international capital so striking at the end of the 20th century, as Burgmann herself points out at the beginning of her article. Why is it the early Marx, and the Classical Marxists, who fail to inspire the anti-globalization movement, and not the "ecological" Marxists inspired by the "late" Marx?

I make no claim to be able to answer that question, but I can, as I always will, take an opportunity to defend Rosa Luxemburg. Red Rosa was not in thrall to the dynamism of capitalism, and if Classical Marxism has failed to inspire anti-globalists, it is not the fault of Rosa Luxemburg. Indeed, within the Marxist tradition, Luxemburg has been excoriated for *not* being a Classical Marxist. Raya Dunayevskaya states the critique in its most basic formulation when she writes that for Marx, "it is production that determines

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the market," while Luxemburg "makes the market determine production."[2] In Marxist circles, this is heresy. It is for this reason that Paul Sweezy dismisses Luxemburg as "the queen of underconsumptionists."[3] Joan Robinson puts the final nail in the coffin, claiming that Sweezy calls *The Accumulation of Capital* "irredeemable nonsense."[4]

In Marxist circles, "underconsumptionism" is heresy, but we are not here to discuss this particular heresy. Rather, the issue is whether or not Luxemburg can be accused of celebrating the dynamism of capitalism and neglecting the role of the revolutionary working class. Sweezy, having mocked Luxemburg, then acknowledges that she "was a more genuine Marxist than any other member of the German movement."[5] A closer look at what Luxemburg actually says in *The Accumulation of Capital*, and how what she says has been misrepresented, helps us understand her as a contributor to, not denier of, the anti-globalization movement.

Given that the anti-globalization movement is entwined with the antiracism movement and condemnations of Western imperialism, Classical Marxists are also being held accountable for their celebration of dynamic capitalism riding roughshod over racialized workers in what has been known as the Third World. Even Raya Dunayevskaya, one of Luxemburg's most eloquent defenders and fervent champions, writes that she "did not draw any conclusions about the Black Africans being a revolutionary force. That revolutionary role was reserved for the proletariat alone."[6] Yes, Luxemburg does see Black Africans as victims, and yes, she fails to theorize Black Africans as a revolutionary force – in *The Accumulation of Capital*.

That said, Dunayevskaya is mistaken in positing Black Africans and proletarians as distinct categories. She is fully aware of Luxemburg's legendary upbraiding of her friend Mathilde Wurm for suggesting that the Jews have suffered more than other peoples. On 16 February 1917, Luxemburg writes to Wurm, "What do you want with this particular suffering of the Jews? The poor victims on the rubber plantations in Putumayo, the Negroes in Africa with whose bodies the Europeans play a game of catch, are just as near to me."[7] I do

2. Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (1982; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 39.

3. Paul M. Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (1942; New York: Modern Reader Paperbacks, 1970), 171.

4. Joan Robinson, "Introduction," in Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), 21.

5. Sweezy, *Theory of Capitalist Development*, 207.

6. Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 37.

7. Stephen Eric Bronner, ed., *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1978), 179.

not know what anyone else sees, but I see more recognition of international capital's exploitation of Black workers in Luxemburg than in Burgmann.

Luxemburg argues that "capitalist production … can no more confine itself to the natural resources and productive forces of the temperate zone than it can manage with white labour alone."[8] Capital accumulates on the backs of exploited wage labour and the free labour of slaves. It is Dunayevskaya, not Luxemburg, who portrays the proletariat as white. It is Burgmann, citing Thomas Piketty, who claims that globalization "weighs particularly heavily on the least-skilled workers in the wealthy countries" (200).

On the other hand, Luxemburg argues that capital "needs the means of production and the labour power of the whole globe for untrammelled accumulation; it cannot manage without the natural resources and the labour power of all territories."[9] Then, getting at the heart of the matter, Luxemburg notes that capitalism operates in the non-capitalist world "by assimilating the very conditions which alone can ensure its own existence."[10] That assimilation involves the proletarianization of African workers and peasants.

Much more of the world's workforce has been proletarianized since Luxemburg published *The Accumulation of Capital*. Whatever one thinks about the dialectical relationship between production and the market, the heart of Luxemburg's analysis is that in the end, capitalism consumes itself; it cannot be written off as a Classical Marxist celebration of the dynamism of capitalism. It is simply not true, as Burgmann implies, that Luxemburg is arguing against the "true" Marx. She is, in fact, confirming Marx's belief that only socialism can prevent the common ruin of the contending classes.

Burgmann's claim that Luxemburg was blinded by the dynamism of capitalism serves to hide her own omissions – an astonishing neglect of Third World workers and what they have and do not have in common with "white" workers in the West. By dismissing Third International Marxism as a "stain" on Second International Marxism, Burgmann disguises the crucial commonalities in the thought of Luxemburg and Lenin on the rise and impact of Western imperialism. Luxemburg has a strange way of celebrating the dynamism of capitalism. As Kohei Saito points out about *The Accumulation of Capital*, Luxemburg criticizes "the destructive impact of capitalist development upon non-capitalist societies, even arguing that capitalism was borne fundamentally in a non-capitalist environment."[11] In other words, Black workers are more exploited than white workers.

8. Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital*, 362.

9. Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital*, 365.

10. Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital*, 366.

11. Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 35.

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The heart and soul of Classical Marxism is not a celebration of the dynamism of capitalism; it is a fervent belief that working-class self-activity will lead to the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of a socialist society. According to Luxemburg, the capitalist system becomes "a string of political and social disasters and convulsions … punctuated by periodical economic catastrophes or crises." However, "even before this natural economic impasse of capital's own creating is properly reached it becomes a necessity for the international working class to revolt against the rule of capital."[12] Several years later, as Joe Pateman points out, Lenin observes "that Britain, by creating industry in its African colonies and using African labour to work it, was laying the basis for the proletarianization of African people and their future struggle for freedom."[13]

There is no fundamental disagreement here; disagreement between Luxemburg and Lenin lies elsewhere. As Paul Mattick argues, Lenin believes that working-class struggle must be organized, planned, and led by a vanguard party. Luxemburg, on the other hand, believes that "conscious revolutionists spring … from the mass in its actual revolutionary activity."[14] In the African context, it is Lenin who won. As Pateman points out, African socialists "championed" Lenin's theories and "applied them to their struggles."[15] No doubt Burgmann thinks Pateman's claim that in the era of globalization "Lenin's fundamental thesis remains compelling" is so much nonsense, but she cannot write out of history Lenin's impact on the 20th-century leaders who fought Western imperialism and the rise of globalization.[16]

Burgmann provides a history of the 20th century in which there is not a word spoken about Frantz Fanon and Nelson Mandela, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, Mao Tse-tung and Ho Chi Minh, all makers of the century influenced by Lenin. She claims that Second International Marxism ends in 1914 and never tells us how it remained more influential than Third International Marxism through the decades of anti-colonialism in the Third World. The historical reality is that Burgmann, in documenting the failures of Classical Marxism to support the anti-globalization movement, cannot write out of history the role Third International Marxism played in making an anti-globalization movement possible in the first place. I am not disputing her claim that young activists are generally more influenced by anarchism than by Leninism,

12. Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital*, 467.

13. Joe Pateman, "The Centrality of Africa in Lenin's Theory of Imperialism," *Review of African Political Economy* 49, 172 (April 2022): 295.

14. Paul Mattick, *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 44, https://marxists.org/archive/mattick-paul/1936/luxemburg-lenin.htm.

15. Pateman, "Centrality of Africa," 300.

16. Pateman, "Centrality of Africa," 300.

but it was Leninism that played a far greater role in creating the preconditions for the anti-globalization movement.

By writing Third International Marxism out of history, Burgmann attributes a role to Second International Marxism that it did not actually have. In her analysis, Classical Marxism is a straw man. Missing is the fact that Leninist-inspired anticolonial movements were driven by a belief that imperialism and colonialism had to be destroyed *before* the Third World could be developed. Lenin writes about imperialism as "parasitic or decaying capitalism," not as dynamic capitalism.[17] In the Third World, any Classical Marxist belief in the dynamism of capitalism had been destroyed long before the anti-globalization movement ever saw the light of day.

Burgmann has to discredit both Luxemburg and Lenin in order to offer up an alternative source of opposition to globalization. The two alternatives are anarchism and religious fervour, which she variously describes as chiliasm and millenarianism. Echoing David Graeber, Burgmann depicts anarchism as "the very centre of the revolutionary Left" (208). It is true that Marx's focus is wage workers at the point of production. It is also the case, as has been noted ad nauseum by Marx's critics, that Marx left us with a number of intemperate dismissals and attacks on the peasantry and the lumpenproletariat that are continually trotted out whenever he needs to be discredited. Burgmann is on solid ground when she argues that anarchism retains a credibility with the victims of globalization Marxism has lost. She is also correct in arguing that anarchism lends itself more readily to a critique of arbitrary power and corporate control.

The great problem is that, by Burgmann's own admission, she is talking about a moment in time. All her citations concerning the re-emergence and relevance of anarchism in what she considers the "alter-globalization" movement, because it is more inclusive, are taken from the 2000–01 period. For a "brief period," Burgmann argues, "ecstatic experience had endangered the existing order" (207). Anyone who believes that the capitalist system is threatened by "ecstatic experience" is standing in quicksand, not on solid ground, when attacking Classical Marxists. Religious fervour, even in the alter-globalization moment, only threatened the existing order in the minds of the "summit-hoppers." Most of these summit-hoppers emerged out of the university, not out of the factory or the lumpenproletariat.

Burgmann is attributing to Western anarchism accomplishments it cannot claim. She argues, for example, that anarchism led the charge in demanding that the Left be more consensus-based and democratic, when in reality this was a charge led by the feminist movement. It is not just that the Western feminist movement is, for all intents and purposes, missing in action in Burgmann's account; so is the women's movement in the Third World. Alter-globalism is

17. V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d.), 215.

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related to the global justice movement, which advocates environmental protection, the rights of workers and women, defence of Indigenous Peoples, and defence of local economies. All these concerns are the concerns of women, but Burgmann wants us to believe that alter-globalization has been driven more by the ideas of Mikhail Bakunin than by the on-the-ground organizing of women. Burgmann's neglect of the women's movement in both worlds is revealing and alerts us to the fact that there are failures here that cannot be pinned on Classical Marxists.

Burgmann is aware of the weakness of her own argument, because her purpose is not to defend and strengthen anarchism but rather to argue for an alternative Marxism. She begins by claiming that the Western Marxists of the interwar period – Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, Antonio Gramsci, Anton Pannekoek, and others – placed a stress on "agency and consciousness" that has been absent in Classical Marxism (210). It is, in fact, not true that "agency and consciousness" were "absent" in the Second International. There is, however, a great deal of truth in Burgmann's claim that over the course of the 20th century, Western Marxist thought "shifted away from celebration of the emancipatory potential of human self-activity toward more pessimistic intellectual themes that emphasized the domination of capital" (210). At this point, she offers up Stuart Hall, Perry Anderson, and Meghnad Desai as embodying the Classical Marxist celebration of capitalist dynamism and denial of the self-activity of the working class. Burgmann claims that in the process, they undo all the good done by the Western Marxists of the interwar period, paving the way for the return of Classical Marxism's celebration of the dynamism of capitalism and failure to advance the alter-globalization movement.

At this point Burgmann turns to "Autonomist" Marxism, a term she attributes to Harry Cleaver and a Marxism most fully realized by Antonio Negri. Autonomist Marxism, Burgmann claims, is "a distinctive understanding of Marxism," which has the ability to surmount the inability of Classical Marxism "to give the subjective standpoint of the working class a central role in the critical process" (212). Burgmann fails – because she has essentially written Leninism out of the history of the 20th century – to tell her readers that Lenin's position asserts that Second International Marxists place *too much* emphasis on the "subjective standpoint of the working class."

Lenin was not entirely wrong. In *Reform or Revolution*, Rosa Luxemburg envisions "a long and stubborn struggle," in which the proletariat "will be repulsed more than once." According to Luxemburg, the proletariat "is absolutely obliged to seize power once or several times 'too early' before it can maintain itself in power for good."[18] Luxemburg is so committed to the self-activity of the working class that she is willing to let the workers make their own mistakes, and to fail. It is for this very reason, she believes, that they will ultimately prevail.

18. Mary-Alice Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 82, 83.

Autonomist Marxism is not a distinctive understanding of Marxism; it is a fraud. Burgmann, like Hardt and Negri before her, is reinventing the wheel. It is true, as Burgmann observes in paraphrasing Michael Hardt, that Classical Marxism never succeeded "in unifying itself with the standpoint of the working class," but it is not true that Classical Marxists did not "recognize the proletariat as the direct and effective agent of social transformation, capable of recreating and managing society" (212). It is Luxemburg, after all, who writes in *The Russian Revolution* that "the kindling of revolutionary idealism … can be maintained over any length of time only through the intensively active life of the masses themselves under conditions of unlimited political freedom."[19] Not for her the "determinism and fatalism" Burgmann claims was "inherent" in Classical Marxism (215).

Burgmann would have us believe that the working class "rises up" in the thought of Hardt and Negri, who make the "revolutionary subject" the "driving force and theoretical result of Marx's endeavour" (213). I am sure this would come as quite the surprise to Luxemburg. As anyone who has read *The Communist Manifesto* knows, this *is* Marx's endeavour. When the vision of Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg is realized, the summit-hoppers will be able to stay home.

19. Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 392.

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