

# *The Logic of the Historical Evolution of Rosa Luxemburg's Idea of "Self-Centralization"*

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**Abstract:** Luxemburg was a famous revolutionary, theorist, and communist fighter of the Second International in Western Europe. Luxemburg's idea of "self-centralization" was proposed within a specific historical context. It underwent a historical process of evolution and development from germination to maturity. Luxemburg and Lenin had their own views on the differences in the organizational principles of the party. Luxemburg believed that the highly centralized organizational principle advocated by Lenin was not conducive to the exercise of democratic rights within the Party. This resulted in a minority of people grasping core rights and making corruption easier. However, Luxemburg's criticism of Lenin's "centralized system" did not take into account the actual situation of the Russian state and the practical challenges of its operation. The social situation and popular base of Russia under the feudal dictatorship of the czar were different from the relaxed social environment and strong democratic foundation of Germany. Therefore, Luxemburg's views were considered one-sided and limited. However, Luxemburg's concept of internal democracy also had a positive impact on Lenin's concept of "democratic centralism." At the same time, Luxemburg's concept of internal democracy also included a positive mention of Lenin's "democratic centralism" and advocated for the theoretical development of proletarian political parties.

## **1. Background of Rosa Luxemburg's Idea of "Self-Centralization"**

Rosa Luxemburg was a prominent communist and revolutionary who played a leading role in the European socialist revolution within the history of the international communist movement. She made significant contributions to the inheritance and development of Marxism, particularly through the concept of "self-centralization," which she introduced with a new interpretation of the principle of party organization. By emphasizing the importance of party organization, she advanced the development of Marxist party theory.

With the failure of the Paris Commune and the bankruptcy of the First International, European capitalism entered a period of steady development. This was coupled with the outbreak of the Second Industrial Revolution, during which the productive forces made significant progress. The efficiency of industrial production was greatly improved, leading to a "surge" of growth in the working class in Europe as a result of the development of the Second Industrial Revolution. With the establishment of the Second International, the socialist movement in all European countries experienced a resurgence, and the workers' movement, led by the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), dealt a significant

blow to the bourgeois authorities, yielding remarkable results. The bourgeois authorities, compelled by the significant pressure of the workers' revolutions, implemented a policy of welfare protection for the workers to mitigate the social instability caused by the workers' revolutions, thereby diminishing the revolutionary spirit of the workers. At the same time, the Social Democratic Party of Germany was also influenced by this social trend. The right-wing members of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, represented by Bernstein, became the spokesmen of "revisionism" and gradually gained an advantageous position within the party. They garnered the support of the majority of the party members and presumptuously attempted to achieve socialism through a strategy of parliamentary democracy and social improvement. This statement deviates from the Marxist position on class struggle. It reflects a simplistic evolutionary perspective that aims to dampen the revolutionary spirit of the workers' movement, discard the proletarian revolution, promote reformism, and gradually move towards communism. Luxemburg, as the leader of the left wing of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), was keenly aware of the spread of "revisionist" ideas within the party. In order to uphold the fundamental revolutionary principles of Marxism, she engaged in a fierce exchange of ideas with Bernstein, the leader of the "right wing" of the party. He severely criticized Bernstein's "revisionism" and expressed his own views on whether social improvement or revolution should be pursued, dealing a heavy blow to the "right wing" of the German Social Democratic Party represented by Bernstein. He defended the revolutionary position of the proletariat.

The Russian workers' movement was also influenced by the revolutions in Western Europe. However, it was suppressed by the Tsar, dealing a severe blow to the revolutionary movement. While leading the workers' struggle against the tsarist rule, Lenin recognized the need for the creation of a highly centralized and unified political party based on Marxist principles. He believed that such a party, led by worker revolutionaries, would better unite the workers against Tsarist autocracy. In his 1899 work "Our Task," Lenin stated that "the task of the Social Democratic Party is to organize the workers and conduct propaganda and agitation among them to transform their spontaneous struggle against the oppressors into a class-wide struggle. It is a struggle to establish a distinct political party and embody a specific political and socialist ideology."<sup>[1]</sup> It is clear that a highly centralized and united organization had a significant advantage in Russia's particular situation. As the internal struggle in Russia intensified, differences arose within the party over the principles of organization. These differences eventually led to the split of the Russian Social-Democratic Party into two factions: the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. Commissioned by Martov of the Menshevik faction, Luxemburg published "Organizational Problems of the Russian Social-Democratic Party" after becoming acquainted with Lenin's Principle of Party Organization. This publication was a serious critique of Lenin's idea of "centralization" and presented Luxemburg's own views. Rosa Luxemburg believed that the "centralized system" was based on two basic principles: the organization and activities of the party are subordinated to the central organ. The central organ alone thinks, plans, and decides for everyone. Furthermore, the structured nucleus of the party is completely isolated from its revolutionary surroundings.<sup>[2]</sup> Luxemburg believed that the centralization practiced by the party lacked an active and creative spirit. Instead, it was characterized by a sterile guardian mentality that focused on controlling the party's activities rather than promoting growth.<sup>[2]</sup> The Social Democrats should consider the type of centralization they should implement. After intense criticism, Luxemburg developed the concept of "self-centralization."

## **2. The Germination of Rosa Luxemburg's Idea of "Self-Centralization" During the Polish Period**

The Polish capitalist economy grew alongside the development of European industry. Rosa Luxemburg's early "self-centralization" was closely related to her living conditions, education, and

revolutionary activities within a complex international context.

Rosa Luxemburg was born in 1871 into a wealthy Jewish merchant family that fostered a liberal, democratic, and optimistic atmosphere. Her upbringing instilled in her a desire for a free, equal, fair, and just society. While at university, she became interested in the theoretical writings of Marx and Engels. She studied them seriously and learned about them. During her doctoral studies, Luxemburg realized that Poland's economic development problems were caused by the capitalist system. In her dissertation, "The Development of Polish Industry," she explained the relationship between monopoly capital and the capitalist economic system, illustrating how capitalism exploits and appropriates the surplus value of the proletarian masses.<sup>[3]</sup> Luxemburg aimed to mobilize the proletariat by standing on the class position of the masses to carry out the struggle and adhering to the belief in socialism. In 1893, she founded a journal for the working class and the Social Democratic Party in Poland, a political party in Poland with Marxism as its guiding principle. She was also a founding member of the Social Democratic Party in Poland. Luxemburg actively engaged in the forefront of the proletarian struggle and acquired practical experience in the revolutionary workers' movement in Poland through her involvement in the "spontaneous" movement. She also deepened her understanding of the pivotal role of the masses in the revolutionary struggle, summarized the lessons she learned, and acquired new knowledge and insights into how workers engage in the revolutionary struggle. Her understanding of the principle of organization was enriched by her experience in various revolutionary struggles. She applied this understanding to the practice of revolutionary struggle on the workers' front. Her concept of social democracy laid a strong foundation for the theoretical advancement of the Second International, which was shaped by practical experience.

### **3. The Development and Growth of Rosa Luxemburg's Idea of Self-Centralization in the German Period**

In 1898, Luxemburg moved to Berlin, Germany, but continued to devote herself to the Polish Social Democratic Party. She also actively participated in the revolutionary struggle of the workers of the German Social Democratic Party. Due to the complexity of the revolutionary struggle and the fragmented and chaotic organization of the party, the left leaders, represented by Luxemburg and Liebknecht, engaged in a fierce debate with the "revisionists" led by Bernstein. However, the majority of party members chose to embrace Bernstein's reformism. They believed that the ongoing revolutionary struggles in Germany, despite their importance to the socialist movement, were not sufficient to bring about the desired change in capitalist society. The majority of party members believed in Bernstein's reformism, which suggested that the proletariat had already secured their rights and interests through revolutionary struggles. It proposed that a gradual transition to socialism through improvement was feasible within Germany's current capitalist society. Luxemburg strongly opposed Bernstein's "revisionism," believing that only through revolution could the bourgeoisie be completely destroyed and democratic socialism, which truly represented the proletariat and the masses, be established. In her book "Is Society Improvement or Revolution?" Luxemburg explained her views comprehensively and in depth. At the same time, she sharply and forcefully criticized Bernstein's ideas.<sup>[3]</sup> The basis for Luxemburg's concept of "self-centralization" was also the divergence of the two viewpoints within the German Social Democratic Party and the direct cause of its creation.

Following the outbreak of the First World War, the German Social Democratic Party was divided on the issue of war. Luxemburg, representing the left-wing members, firmly opposed the imperialist war, while the right-wing conservative forces within the party chose to support the authorities of the unjust imperialist war. Luxemburg developed the concept of 'self-centralization' during her debates with Bernstein on advancing the social revolution. She also considered the conservative forces'

attitudes toward the imperialist war. This concept was formed amidst disagreements and ideological battles. The rise of the workers' revolutionary movement in Germany was prompted by the monopoly and oppression of German capitalism. However, the workers' power remained weak in the face of bourgeois oppression. Therefore, the bourgeois government weakened the determination of the workers to carry out the revolutionary movement by improving their treatment and welfare policies. It also weakened the leading role of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SDPG) in the revolutionary struggle of the workers. Meanwhile, different trends of thought within the party continued to diverge, causing serious internal conflicts. Meanwhile, various ideological factions within the party were consistently moving further apart, resulting in significant internal conflicts and organizational chaos. Luxemburg delved deeper into the concept of "self-centralization" when faced with such a complex social situation and struggle. The cause of its creation.

#### **4. The Maturing of Rosa Luxemburg's Idea of Self-Centralization in the Russian Period**

While the workers' revolutionary struggle was unfolding in Western Europe, the proletarian revolutionary movement was also rapidly evolving in the countries of Eastern Europe, particularly in Russia. The oppression of the Tsarist feudal dictatorship in Russia contributed to the intensification of the workers' revolutionary struggle and the upsurge of the proletarian revolutionary movement in the country. According to Lenin, the leader of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party (RSPDW), the current situation in the country was promising, but the effectiveness and nature of the struggles were unsatisfactory. The absence of centralized and unified leadership, the limited control of political parties over their members, and the fragmentation of organizations have led to a failure to aggregate the effects of struggle, thereby hindering the creation of a scale effect. To achieve victory, it is urgent to establish a unified, centralized, and proletarian party with clear leadership. The Russian Social-Democratic Party of Labor experienced internal contradictions that led to a split into two factions: the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. These factions disagreed on the principles of organization and membership development, as well as on the formulation and implementation of party policy. Lenin believed that members of a political party should possess excellent skills and firm beliefs to maintain its advancement. Luxemburg presented his views on the challenges confronting the Russian Social-Democratic Party in his article "Organizational Problems of the Russian Social-Democratic Party."<sup>[2]</sup> He supported the party's revolutionary efforts by writing articles in favor of the Russian Revolution and developing his concept of "self-centralization."

Luxemburg's social democratic ideas were greatly influenced by the victory of the October Revolution in Russia, and the concept of "self-centralization" was further developed and matured. In her essay "On the Russian Revolution," Luxemburg praised the October Revolution led by Lenin, which established the world's first socialist country under the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>[2]</sup> She also presented her own thesis on the nature of socialism and the building of a proletarian party in a country under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Adhering to the fundamental tenet of Marxism that the people are the architects of history, this text upholds the people's spirit of initiative and elucidates how proletarian parties can guarantee the establishment of socialist democracy by maintaining close ties with the masses. At the same time, it criticizes the highly centralized and unified principle of party organization that Lenin put forward under the arduous circumstances of his struggles, and the highly centralized principle of party organization in which individuals are absolutely subordinate to the organization and local organizations are absolutely subordinate to the central government. Luxembourg argued that the party organization is composed of a number of members, each of whom should have the right to express their own opinions and views. Blind obedience to the decisions of the central government and the organization will lead to another kind of extreme authoritarian rule. Only by giving full play to true democracy can centralization be better realized; otherwise, the local

organization of the party and individuals will be reduced to tools for the implementation of the rule of the central government and will lose their own democratic rights. The highly centralized organizational structure can result in a scenario where the central top management of the party is unable to grasp the actual situation at the grassroots level of the party organization. Over time, this can result in a minority of people having the final say, which can lead to corruption. This is not conducive to the dictatorship of the proletarian political party and can negatively impact the construction of socialist democracy. The topic of party organization in Russia, which was the subject of debate between Luxemburg and Lenin, provided practical impetus to Luxemburg's concept of 'self-centralization' and further developed her idea of social democracy.

## **5. Lenin Proposed "Democratic Centralism" As a Development Beyond Rosa Luxemburg's Concept of "Self-Centralism"**

Luxemburg's concept of "self-centralization" as the core of the organizational principles of proletarian political parties contributes to enhancing intra-party democracy in Marxist political parties, improving the party's organizational system, and offering a significant perspective for preventing and addressing individual arbitrariness within the party.

The main difference between Lenin and Luxemburg on the question of organization is that Lenin tended to be centralist, while Luxemburg emphasized democracy. Each had its own emphasis. "Democratic centralism" was first explicitly put forward by Lenin in 1905 in his Resolution on the Reorganization of the Party.<sup>[1]</sup> From a certain perspective, it extensively incorporates the rational core of Luxemburg's democratic thought regarding the advancement of "internal party democracy," refines and advances the original "centralized system," and introduces the concept of "democratic centralization." Thus, the concept of "democratic centralization" was put forward. Compared with the "self-centralization system" proposed by Luxemburg, the concept of "democratic centralization" is a more scientifically sound concept that accurately elucidates the dialectical relationship between democracy and centralization. It emphasizes centralization based on democracy and democracy guided by centralization. The concept of "democratic centralism" is not simply a rejection of the Luxemburg concept of "self-centralization", but a rejection of the Luxemburg concept of "self-centralization" while retaining the idea of "self-centralization" as expressed in the Luxemburg model. It is a rejection of the Luxemburg concept of "self-centralization" and a retention of the positive and rational aspects of the Luxemburg concept of "self-centralization." The proletarian political parties should pay attention to fully absorbing the positive aspects of the concept of "self-centralization," especially to achieve "centralization" in "democratic centralization" and embody "self-centralization" within the Luxemburg system of discourse. In particular, it should achieve the "concentration" of "democratic centralism" and become the "self-centralization" of the Luxemburg discourse; otherwise, the "democratic centralism" practiced in the organizational life of the party would not be "democratic centralism" in the true sense of the word. Here, we emphasize that the "centralization" in "democratic centralism" should be the "self-centralization" of the proletarian party, which truly enables democracy, to avoid pseudo-centralism. This is to prevent the phenomenon of personal arbitrariness in the name of "centralization" from appearing in the system of democratic centralism. Democracy and centralization are complementary and indispensable.

Respect for people's spirit of initiative and implementation of the mass line. Luxemburg advocates the development of internal democracy and the strengthening of supervision by the masses to avoid excessive concentration of power in the hands of a few individuals and to achieve sustainable development for the party. Luxemburg emphasizes the subjective position of the popular masses in the socialist revolution and the socialist regime. The masses are the class basis for the survival and development of the proletarian party. Luxemburg believed that in order to embark on the path to

socialism in Russia, it was essential to not only adhere to the guiding ideology of Marxism but also to garner the support of the widest possible range of people. She argued that by maintaining a tangible connection between the proletarian party and the masses, it could be embraced and cherished by the people. Luxemburg argues that the essence of a socialist society does not lie in the degree of concentration of the means of production, but in the transformation of the working masses from the dominated to the masters of their own political and economic life. They become capable of defending their legitimate rights and interests against violation and exploitation. Socialism is ultimately the rule of the masses, the people's state. The people have unlimited creativity and power for development. The full development of the pioneering spirit among the masses enables the proletarian political parties to remain vital and highly militant. The victory of the socialist revolution is the triumph of every proletarian involved in the proletarian struggle.

## **6. The Defects of Rosa Luxemburg's Idea of "Self-Centralization"**

Firstly, Luxemburg's idea of democracy was mainly influenced by her experience of revolutionary struggle in Poland and Germany. Compared with the countries of Western Europe, Russia's capitalism started late and lagged behind in its development. Simultaneously, Russia was politically under the feudal autocracy of the Tsar for a long time, and the foundations of democracy were still very weak. Under such challenging conditions in Russia, the development of the proletariat was neither sufficient nor sound. The proletariat was not fully developed or well organized, as its structure was highly decentralized and complex. In terms of the level of competence and ideological consciousness of its members, the Luxemburg concepts of "self-centralization" and "self-management" could not be realized solely by relying on the spontaneity of its members. In such a complicated internal situation in Russia, if the proletariat aimed to achieve this goal by seizing power through revolution, it was inevitable that they would opt for a more favorable centralism in their organizational principles. It was crucial to enhance their executive capacity during the revolution. Luxemburg did not perceive the issue of mass spontaneity through the lens of the unique conditions in Russia. Consequently, the proletariat's call for democratic practices in Russia was disconnected from the country's actual circumstances and deemed undesirable. Under the White Terror in Russia, when will the peasant masses, who are generally lacking in class consciousness and cultural awareness, consciously recognize and accept it? It can be seen that Luxemburg obviously did not recognize the objective conditions of the Russian Revolution. Instead, she only developed her ideas from an abstract understanding of the socialist movement in Western Europe, which significantly weakened the depth of historical materialism in her thought.

Secondly, Luxemburg's "self-centralization" is not very practical. Luxemburg attached great importance to the spontaneity of the masses and respected their creativity. However, in light of the actual situation in Russia, she did not analyze the Russian masses as a group in concrete terms. This was reflected in Luxemburg's overestimation of the Russian proletariat. The same issue was also evident in her understanding of the revolution in Germany and Western Europe. Why did the workers' movement in Western Europe, with its long history and many years of experience, not achieve the same rapid progress and results as in Russia? Luxemburg attributed much of this to the conservative tactics of the proletarian parties and the erroneous tendencies of revisionism. She envisioned correcting these errors through a broad mobilization of the masses and a European socialist revolution distinct from that of Russia. The course of history shows us that Luxemburg's attempt ultimately failed. She placed her hopes for a European revolution on mass action to combat various erroneous tendencies without recognizing the underlying causes. Reformism was not a temporary mistaken tendency that appeared by chance, but had a deep social basis. Thanks to the long and full development of capitalism in Western Europe and the emergence of a temporary situation of

prosperity, the class contradictions were somewhat eased. This led to the growth of "legitimate sentiment" in society the "revolutionary sentiment" declined. This tendency was not only reflected in the Social-Democratic Party but also had a wide influence on the European proletariat. This influence was also the reason why the November Revolution launched by Luxemburg and others did not evoke a strong reaction among the proletariat. In this way, Luxemburg, as always, emphasized mass action but neglected the prevailing psychological state of the European working masses under the social conditions of that time. This also reflected the fundamental contradiction in Luxemburg's view of the masses. Moreover, the emphasis on the direct influence of the masses on political affairs and their full participation in public life also pointed Luxemburg's socialist democracy to an ideal state of direct democracy, as she articulated in the program of the Spartacist League: "The Spartacist League will never seize power in the country unless it is based on the clear will and consent of the majority of the proletariat throughout Germany."<sup>[2]</sup> In fact, achieving and defining the true will of the masses is challenging due to the diverse interests within the population. Not only was it impossible to realize this objective during the revolutionary period, but it remains difficult to implement it in institutions and concrete procedures even in modern society.

## 7. Conclusion

Luxemburg's concept of 'self-centralization' has certain historical limitations and theoretical defects because it originated from a specific historical context. It is undeniable that Luxemburg played a crucial role in Lenin's proposal of 'democratic centralization'. However, Lenin rejected Luxemburg's democratic ideas as not applicable to the reality of Russia, but he retained their reasonable elements. Luxemburg's differences with Lenin also arose from the party's organizational principles. She did not oppose centralism per se, but rather extreme centralism. The disagreement arose from differing opinions on how to achieve "centralization" and prevent "extreme centralization" in feudal and backward Russia. The writer failed to consider the specific conditions of the country and instead evaluated Russia's revolutionary practices solely in comparison to those of Western Europe. It is important to avoid making subjective evaluations. However, the author failed to consider the unique circumstances of the Russian state. The approach of solely analyzing the Russian struggle through the lens of Western European revolutions disregards objective reality. Therefore, it is important to view Luxembourg's concept of self-centralization dialectically. The positive aspects should be embraced, while the irrational aspects should be discarded. This will allow us to draw strength from Luxembourg's concept of social democracy.

## References

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