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Reflection #3

How did Marx and Lenin gain so many followers? Certainly not by the passion in their writings. Rosa Luxemburg is such a firebrand in comparison! The straightforward nature of her style begs for consumption by the lay person. Yet, reading the publications of these figures seems to raise more questions than answers. We know that Trotsky was severely critiqued by Lenin and by Luxemburg. Were the differences of opinion present in their theories or only in the practical implementations of their work? Where did Luxemburg and Lenin diverge? They all describe the inevitability of revolution is a fiction and that one must seize power and take over. Lenin and Trotsky both seem to believe in the notion of a vanguard proletariat party that carries out this revolution. Is one of the differences that of a national vs transnational utopic socialist movement?

Until now, the content we had read, despite its relevance to the modern condition, seemed abstract. One could take the issues that appeared before and during the Russian Revolution and apply them to issues today, but the ideas themselves seemed not to be alive. That is, until Luxemburg critiques institutions that “ameliorat[e] the situation of the working class” as decreasing the conflict between capital and labor, and by doing so, “sav[ing] the system from ruin” and “enabl[ing] capitalism to maintain itself” (172). This critique isn’t an application of an abstract idea – this is the entirety of modern American democratic politics and civil society. Democrats position themselves in support of social welfare and in defense of minority rights. If they can’t abolish the patriarchal system of marriage, they at least want the right to marry for all. The whole nonprofit industry is based upon the amelioration of immediate and near future suffering. Luxemburg breaks down these sectors as they stand.

Bernstein sees two routes that capitalism could follow – it could lead “inevitably” to socialism or it could go on suppressing contradictions until a revolution is forcibly enacted. The more likely of these paths, he believes, is the latter, in which capitalism continues to exploit the working class but finds ways to support that class just enough so that consumption can continue and profit can be maximized. He also advocates stopping reforms and institutions that try to act as band-aids and lengthen the process. Democratic politicians who do this, who vote against reforms, are seen as extremists and “hurting the cause.” This middle-of-the-road (Trotskyist?) approach won’t do – until they see a revolution, they don’t want small reforms at all. But this reaction makes me deeply uncomfortable. How many lives would one be willing to sacrifice for a dreamed utopia? Some “effective research” non-profit organizations focus their extensive funding on artificial intelligence risk research to mitigate the potential large-scale impacts of superintelligent machines. The argument presented for the redirection of funds for this problem is that a much larger number of people would be affected by AI than the number currently affected by, say, malaria. This utilitarian mode of thinking justifying the means using the end, *without knowing the exact nature of the end*, is to me morally unsound.

One last impression about the dilemma Bernstein (and others) faces about the inevitability of socialism as a transition from capitalism. In class, I had wondered whether, because peasant revolutions were so common, capitalism is really a necessary precondition to the socialist cause. Going back further, Marx details that transition as that from slavery to serfdom to capitalism and finally to socialism. How exactly did capitalism arise? Was it as “inevitable” from the point of serf society? Or serf society from slavery? Or were these power shifts also forced, which would suggest that the one towards socialism would operate similarly?