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REVOLUTIONARY AFFINITIES: DEMOCRACY AND REVOLUTION IN HANNAH  
ARENDT'S PORTRAIT OF ROSA LUXEMBURG

by

MATTHEW FINCK

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

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of Rosa Luxemburg

by

Matthew Finck

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal  
Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

Revolutionary Affinities: Democracy and Revolution in Hannah Arendt's Portrait of Rosa

Luxemburg

by

Matthew Finck

Advisor: Richard Wolin

This work is an exploration of Hannah Arendt's portrait of Rosa Luxemburg. Beginning with a few minor discussions of Luxemburg in her first major work *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), the socialist revolutionary's place in the constellation of figures that appear in Arendt's work grew over the course of her career. Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg culminated in "A Heroine of Revolution," which appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, and in *Men in Dark Times* (1968). Yet Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg was notable for its excision of her revolutionary Marxism in the process of sculpting Luxemburg into a figure who reflected Arendt's own philosophical and revolutionary political theories. This piece is a work of both intellectual history and comparative political theory, exploring the development of Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg through her life and her written works. Furthermore, it will explore the thinkers' shared ambivalent relationship to women's movements and the paradoxical applicability of their thinking to later feminist theory. The resulting combination of theoretical and personal influences articulate the points of commonality between the thinkers and their major differences—differences which Arendt failed to incorporate into her portrait. The resulting comparative analysis between the revolutionary thought of Arendt and Luxemburg explores the relationship between democracy and revolution in

modern political thought. While both thinkers rely upon their notions of revolution to bring substantial meaning to democracy, this thesis problematizes, rather than resolves the relationship between revolution and democracy as laid out in both Luxemburg's and Arendt's claims.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, Rosa Luxemburg, revolution, Marxism, direct democracy, feminist theory, modernity

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## Introduction

2019 marks the hundredth anniversary of the murder of Rosa Luxemburg. Killed in the Spartacist Uprising during the German Revolution, Luxemburg's murder at the hands of the *Freikorps* presaged the subsequent "dark times." Luxemburg's legacy is remarkably contested, whether as a precursor to Leninism, as an ultra-left deviation of Orthodox Marxism, or as a martyr of revolutionary democracy. The role of the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) in suppressing the Spartacist Uprising further exacerbated a division between socialists and communists in Germany, which severely limited the possibility of unity in the face of the rising threat of fascism during the following decades. Within this contested legacy, Hannah Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg is particularly notable. Arendt painted a portrait of Luxemburg as a thinker devoted to freedom and critical of Marxism (rather than someone simply against rival Marxists within the socialist movement). Arendt's own interest in revolutionary ideas was an attempt to recover the "lost treasure" of revolution—the connection between the revolutionary spirit and freedom—in contrast to the rising threat of totalitarianism. Beyond a shared interest in revolutionary ideas, both thinkers possessed many notable similarities. Both were women in a field dominated by men, both were Jewish thinkers in a German milieu, and both held a strong distinction between their private lives and the need to act politically in public. These affinities between the figures were so strong that German director, Margarethe von Trotta, cast the same actor, Barbara Sokuwa, as the titular characters in the biographical films *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986) and *Hannah Arendt* (2012).

The personal affinity between Arendt and Luxemburg was not a connection that Arendt sought to reject. In a letter to her husband, Heinrich Blücher, in 1958, Arendt relayed a story in which she was introduced at a lecture in Munich and was compared to both Ricarda Huch and

Rosa Luxemburg. Arendt wrote, “I answered, without reacting to Huch, that I was very honored to have my name and Rosa Luxemburg’s mentioned in the same breath.”<sup>1</sup> Yet following a purely biographical approach, with its emphasis on an individual psychohistory, one may risk misreading Arendt’s portrait of Luxemburg as a purely personal matter. After the publication of *Men in Dark Times*, Mary McCarthy wrote to Arendt describing an interaction with a partygoer who called her essay on Luxemburg “Hannah’s most personal work.” McCarthy wrote, “her idea was that you ‘identified’ with Rosa Luxemburg, seeing her quarrel with the German Socialists as *your* quarrel with the organized Jews. ‘Such passion,’ etc. I told her that I did not see this at all, in fact became rather annoyed at her insistence.”<sup>2</sup> Such a misunderstanding of Arendt’s portrait of Luxemburg could easily arise from an attempt to psychoanalyze or to read more personal intentions into Arendt’s portrait than are present in the works themselves. There is a danger in allowing the personal category of Arendt’s portrait of Luxemburg to supersede the theoretical.

At the core of Arendt’s portrait of Luxemburg is their shared interest in the political concept of spontaneity. Both figures embraced the element of spontaneity as the source of the energy that drives revolutions forward. However, what each figure meant by spontaneity is quite different. Arendt’s notion of spontaneity was rooted in her ontological concept of *Natality*—the human capacity for newness that serves as the foundation of freedom. The emergence of democratic councils in revolutions without any continuity between them was, for Arendt, evidence of their embeddedness in the human condition, rather than in a historical tradition of

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt to Heinrich Blücher, July 1958, in *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher 1936-1968*, ed. Lotte Kohler, trans. Peter Constantine (New York City: Harcourt Books, 1996), 323–33.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt to Mary McCarthy, October 11 1966, in *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949-1975*, ed. Carol Brightman, 1st ed. (New York City: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1995), 196.

revolution. Arendt judged revolutionaries according to their willingness to recognize and channel these spontaneous energies into new political forms—most ideally into direct democracies. The key for Arendt was that these new political forms are not influenced by calls for political action to resolve economic or social problems, because the conditions of a realm, the Social, threatened the emergence of spontaneity and political freedom. The Social, a product of growing social and economic problems within society, threatens to erode political life and thus undermine the basis of human freedom.

Luxemburg's own understanding of spontaneity was quite different. In "The Mass Strike" (1906), Luxemburg articulated her concept of spontaneity that was inspired by her participation in the Revolution of 1905 in the Russian Empire. Focusing on the *interrelationship* between economic and political struggles, Luxemburg proposed a *dialectical* strategy of spontaneity and organization. Spontaneity, expressed through the mass strike, was for Luxemburg, "not a crafty method discovered by subtle reasoning for the purpose of making the proletarian struggle more effective, *but the method of motion of the proletarian mass*, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution."<sup>3</sup> Superficially, in her belief that parties cannot "make" a revolution, and in her commitment to following the revolutionary impulses of the initial outbreak of revolution, Luxemburg's notion is quite similar to Arendt's own understanding of revolution.

In critical ways, the differences between them are such that Arendt's portrait extrudes Marxism from her interpretation of Luxemburg in order to situate her within her ontological political framework. In contrast to Arendt, Luxemburg identifies the source of spontaneity *within*

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<sup>3</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions," in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Kevin B. Anderson and Peter Hudis (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 192. Italics in original.

economic struggles, rather than an ontological site of Natality outside of it. Rather than keeping the political separate from the economic, Luxemburg's revolutionary theory is centered on the dialectical interrelationship between them in which "this sudden change of the economic struggle into the political and the political struggle into the economic is possible."<sup>4</sup> Finally, Luxemburg articulated a role for the socialist party organization to escalate and elevate the struggles into ever greater levels of political action and thus raise the overall class consciousness of the proletariat.<sup>5</sup> On these points, the framework of Arendt's ontological politics would allow no crossover and her resulting interpretation of Marx further drove a gap between her own and Luxemburg's revolutionary theories.

As a result, several conflicts that Luxemburg had with other Marxists in the socialist movement are also evidence of an extrusion of Marxism from Arendt's thought. Within the SPD, Karl Kautsky is the guiltiest, because of his economism and political inaction. For Arendt, this lack of action and a decisive revolutionary theory was the opposite of politics. Luxemburg's *Accumulation of Capital*, with its non-Marxist theory of imperialism and belief in the spontaneity of the masses thus seemingly contradicted these fundamental precepts of the non-political aspects of Marxist ideology and instead crossed over into Arendt's understanding of the realm of Action and politics. The result of Arendt's extrusion of Marxism from her portrait of Luxemburg does not just involve theoretical aspects, but also an entire interpretation of Second International Socialism and the SPD to which Luxemburg's legacy is inevitably tied. Arendt articulated Luxemburg's theoretical battles within the socialist movement as indications of not just a critical stance towards Marxism, but as a method of crafting a portrait in which Luxemburg's political

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<sup>4</sup> Luxemburg, 197.

<sup>5</sup> Luxemburg, 199.

thought stands outside of its historical context. As a result, Arendt is able to transform Luxemburg into a model for her revolutionary ideas but at the cost of a violence towards the socialist revolutionary's actual commitments and ideas.

Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg as a committed, but non-Marxist, revolutionary has been interpreted as somewhat of an oddity by theorists, both Marxist and not. From the Marxist perspective, the fact that Arendt was incorrect in her assessment of Luxemburg's commitment to Marxist theory and economic justice is key. Peter Hudis argues that while "few would deny that Luxemburg has provided moral inspiration for many thinkers and activists, inside and outside of the Marxist tradition—especially because of her fierce political, theoretical and personal independence," Luxemburg herself was deeply embedded in and committed to Marxist theory.<sup>6</sup> Hudis argues that while Luxemburg was willing to fiercely critique many aspects of Marxist theoretical orthodoxy, "she saw such criticism as the essence of Marxism, not as a departure from it."<sup>7</sup> Reflecting the view of sympathetic critics outside of the Marxist tradition, Margaret Canovan, in *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, listed Luxemburg amongst disparate figures from which Arendt took inspiration for her theory of council republicanism, including Montesquieu, Tocqueville and Clemenceau.<sup>8</sup> Yet Luxemburg's place in Arendt's republicanism was linked to her separation of political and economic issues, which Canovan argues:

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Hudis, "Introduction: Luxemburg in Our Time," in *Rosa Luxemburg*, J.P. Nettle, (New York City: Verso Books, 2019), xx.

<sup>7</sup> Hudis, "Introduction: Luxemburg in Our Time," xx.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 212.

For most of Arendt's readers her views in this area are something of an embarrassment, a curiously unrealistic commitment in someone who laid particular stress of realism in politics. Even as an ideal, the model she describes is fatally damaged by the view of economics which we noticed in an earlier chapter in connection with her concept of "society." Only her assumptions about the convergence of capitalism and socialism on provision for a collective life process can explain her belief that economic matters in affluent societies are essentially uncontroversial and therefore unpolitical, and that her councils would be able to stay out of the economic decisions taken by professional administrators, leaving the material welfare of the society to be looked after without needing to be on the political agenda.<sup>9</sup>

As Canovan points out, Arendt's position on the separation between economic and political matters is difficult to reconcile with the reality of modern political life. By collapsing socialism into capitalism, Arendt reduces the fundamental distinctions between both systems into a broad category that encompasses the major economic systems of her contemporary political reality. As Canovan argues, it is difficult to read Arendt without having to reckon with this strict separation between the Political and the Social. Other Arendtian concepts are more open to debate, such as the extent of the centrality of the Graecophilic concepts to her political thought, or her relationship to modernity. However, as this paper will show, the core of Arendt's portrait of Rosa Luxemburg results from Arendt's concept of the Social and the subsequent separation of economic and political interests.

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<sup>9</sup> Canovan, 237.

While it is a relatively simple matter to show the disconnect between Arendt's presentation of Luxemburg and Luxemburg's own political thought, examining the origins of the portrait is more fruitful in drawing implications of Arendt's political thought. A reading of Arendt's portrait and the resulting encounter between Luxemburg and Arendt reveals differences not only in revolutionary strategy, but also in the relationships of their wider projects to modernity and democracy. Because Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg emerges across several of her works, an exploration of her project is at once a work of intellectual history and comparative political theory. Arendt articulates her portrait of Luxemburg through the lens of the ontological political concepts developed in *The Human Condition*. As a result of Arendt's concept of the Social, Marxism is pruned from Luxemburg's political thought. The resulting portrait of Luxemburg is a reflection more of Arendt's philosophical and revolutionary ideas than of Luxemburg's own. An analysis of Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg reveals the distance between the dialectical method of the socialist revolutionary, and Arendt's revolutionary heroism and idealized form of direct democracy. The resulting visions of democracy offer differing relationships to modernity. While Arendt aims to build a democratic bulwark against the anti-political threats embedded in modern social life, Luxemburg's socialist democracy aims to bring democracy to those very aspects which Arendt believes degrade and destroy human freedom.

Why the word "portrait" to describe Arendt's conception of Luxemburg rather than influence? Scholars have differing views on the extent or nature of Luxemburg's influence or role in Arendt's political thought. Canovan names Luxemburg as an influence on Arendt's theory of republicanism<sup>10</sup>, and lists her as one of Arendt's "heroes" of classical republicanism.<sup>11</sup> Seyla

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<sup>10</sup> Canovan, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Canovan, 202.

Benhabib specifically states that Luxemburg serves as an influence on Arendt's thought.<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Young-Bruehl notes that Arendt began planning *On Revolution* while reading Luxemburg's "The Russian Revolution."<sup>13</sup> Yet outside of these areas, Arendt herself never lists Luxemburg as a major influence. Instead, she notes the moments where Luxemburg comes to the *same* conclusions as Arendt on politics, often using her as a model revolutionary who is a perceptive witness to revolution and dark times. While Luxemburg's influence on *Origins* and biographical connection to Arendt form a portion of Arendt's use of Luxemburg in her corpus, the core of her portrait of Luxemburg emerged as an example of the ontological political ideas and revolutionary theory developed in *The Human Condition*. Thus the concept of a portrait better captures a picture of a figure that goes beyond influence. This is not to say that Arendt's portrait is a simple mapping of her ideas onto Luxemburg. Arendt's portrait of Rahel Varnhagen is perhaps the closest analog to her discussions of Luxemburg. As in her portrait of Varnhagen, Arendt is willing to engage personally with her subject and to see, through her personal affinity, a figure who can serve as a political and personal witness to history. Framing Arendt's use of Luxemburg as a portrait captures both the personal and theoretical aspects of this use in her work.

The first section of this paper will explore the genesis of Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg. Focusing on Arendt's published works and letters, this section will complete a picture that emerged piecemeal until *Men in Dark Times*. The entwining of personal affinity and theoretical development of the portrait is not intended as a psychohistory. However, the full portrait of

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<sup>12</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000), 78.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 294.

Luxemburg and her role in Arendt's thinking cannot emerge until some biographical details, such as Blücher's participation in the Spartacist Uprising, and the political leadership struggles of the early *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD) are clear. Thus, the biographical aspects of the work are intended to illuminate the theoretical aspects of her portrait, rather than collapse them into the personal. The goal of this approach is to explore the development of Arendt's portrait and to highlight the influence of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The years that followed the revolution, years that Arendt spent reflecting on it and writing *The Human Condition*, mark the point where Luxemburg grew from a minor influence in Arendt's thought into the revolutionary figure who would appear in *Men in Dark Times*.

Arendt's extrusion of Marxism from her portrait of Luxemburg is a result of her categorization of the Social. The Social is never clearly defined by Arendt, yet discussion over its role in Arendt's political thought is a central feature of debates over its applicability to modern times. Arendt spends the most time detailing the Social in *The Human Condition*, a work that lies close to the center of her philosophical thought. Based on an Aristotelean distinction between the *oikos* and *polis*, Arendt distinguishes between Labor and Work, and the category of Action: a category that combines politics, freedom and the public sphere. The central concepts of *The Human Condition* are further rooted in Arendt's ontological categories of Plurality, the equality of human differences, and Natality, the capacity for human beginning. The result is a philosophical language of politics that is difficult to reconcile with many of Arendt's politically realist works. For both critics and supporters of Arendt, these concepts are problematic and have been much debated—they have been referred to as phenomenological essentialism (Seyla Benhabib), ontological politics (Richard Wolin), or political existentialism (Martin Jay). Because of the emphasis on the ontological origins of Natality in revolution, and the centrality of

revolution in Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg, these concepts will be referred to as ontological politics in this work. The second section will analyze how Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg is linked to her separation of the categories of Action and the Social through the debate surrounding Arendt's concept of the Social, her interpretation of Karl Marx and the resulting applicability of her theory of republicanism to modern political issues.

Section three will explore the similarities between Arendt's portrait of Rahel Varnhagen and that of Rosa Luxemburg. Arendt's concepts of pariah and parvenu, presented as the only options for Varnhagen to attempt to navigate early modern Prussian society—as a woman and a Jew—will be contrasted with the political option that Arendt argues was unavailable during that period of history. Using this political option as a point of departure and decentering the conceptual language of *The Human Condition*, Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg can be seen as an avenue for rereading both thinkers from a feminist perspective. The result is the possibility of a politics that opens, rather than closes off, the avenues closed by Arendt's ontological politics.

The final section returns to Arendt's theory of council republicanism and draws a distinction between Arendt's category of Action and Luxemburg's dialectical *praxis*. This comparison elucidates an irreconcilability between Arendt's revolutionary heroism and Luxemburg's theory of spontaneity and organization. This has important ramifications not just on their revolutionary theories, but to their overall images of democratic societies: Arendt's idealized republicanism, modeled on the Periclean *polis*, is directly related to the spontaneous emergence of human desire for freedom. Luxemburg's theory introduces a third element, the importance of organization, which through an embrace of spontaneity stemming from economic struggles, allows for the transfer of economic struggles into political struggles, and vice versa. The resulting democratic visions draw a strong contrast: Arendt constructs her idealized

republicanism as a bulwark against the threat that modernity can pose to a robust, public democracy, while Luxemburg's socialist democracy, as a result of the dialectical interrelationship between economic and political struggles, seeks precisely to extend democracy into the untouched parts of modern life and thus fulfill its emancipatory potential. However, Luxemburg's own democratic thoughts, best captured in "The Russian Revolution," are also difficult to reconcile when faced with the reality of revolution. This comparative analysis points to the difficulties in reconciling both thinkers' attitudes towards the relationship between revolution and democracy.

## Section 1. The Origins of Arendt's Portrait of Rosa Luxemburg

In order to understand the development of Arendt's portrait of Rosa Luxemburg, it is necessary to trace its emergence across her oeuvre. Beginning with earlier familial exposure to Luxemburg's ideas and the influence of Luxemburg's theory of imperialism on *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt's portrait turns towards Luxemburg's theory of council republicanism as a result of the Hungarian Revolution. Her desire to redeem Luxemburg's legacy and her growing interest in council republicanism were spurred by the Hungarian Revolution, but were articulated through the philosophical concepts developed in *The Human Condition*. This position would be further elaborated in *On Revolution* and in Arendt's review of Peter Nettl's biography of Rosa Luxemburg.

Rosa Luxemburg was an important figure to two members of Arendt's family: her mother, Martha Arendt, and her second husband, Heinrich Blücher. Rosa Luxemburg was known to Arendt as a public figure from a young age. Her parents were moderate Social Democrats (affiliated with the reformist wing of the party of Eduard Bernstein), and, despite their affiliation with such socialist elements, her mother was an admirer of Rosa Luxemburg. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl describes how Martha Arendt took young Hannah to local Königsberg socialist meetings in support of the January Uprising of 1919, and "shouted to her daughter, 'you must pay attention, this is a historical moment!'"<sup>14</sup> While Arendt came from a socialist family, as Young-Bruehl points out, the perspective of her mother already had crossed the reformist-revolutionary divide that Arendt would later reinterpret in *Men in Dark Times*.

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<sup>14</sup> Young-Bruehl, 27–28.

Yet it is Arendt's relationship to Blücher that forms the greatest direct connection to Luxemburg. A member of the *Spartakusbund*, he participated in the January Uprising and the early leadership struggles within the KPD. Young-Bruehl argues that the influence of the struggles within the KPD between supporters of Luxemburg's legacy and Soviet-oriented leaders would be a major source for Arendt's admiration of the council system:

The decline and fall of the German Communist Party, as Blücher recounted it, provided Hannah Arendt with a clear image—one she never failed to refer to—of what any revolution cannot be without: spontaneously organized, locally based councils, or *Räte*, which are controlled neither by existing party councils—in this case, those of the Social Democratic party—nor by external, foreign organizations, in this case, the Moscow party.<sup>15</sup>

Arendt describes the Bolshevization of the KPD with vivid language in *Men in Dark Times*: “the gutter opened, and out of it emerged what Rosa Luxemburg would have called ‘another zoological species.’”<sup>16</sup> The notion that Luxemburg stood at a crossroads between her and her peer group's revolutionary ambitions, and the growing threat of authoritarianism, are central to Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg as a revolutionary.

Luxemburg is first mentioned in Arendt's work in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt cites Luxemburg's article, “Die soziale Krize in Frankenreich,” as an example of a clear analysis of the various (and in Arendt's terms, farcical), attempts by monarchist and reactionary forces to launch a *coup d'état* to overthrow the republic during the Dreyfus Affair.<sup>17</sup> More importantly,

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<sup>15</sup> Young-Bruehl, 128.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1968), 55.

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Books, 1951), 94.

Arendt references Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* in the section of the text dedicated to imperialism.<sup>18</sup> Arendt adopts Luxemburg's position that capitalism must always reproduce the original process of primitive accumulation in the non-capitalist world.<sup>19</sup> This position allowed Arendt to frame imperialism as one of the root causes of the emergence of totalitarianism in Europe: capitalism's need drove both the emergence of scientific racism and ambitions for territorial expansion by nineteenth century European powers. In *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt agrees with Lenin that Luxemburg's theory of imperialism, as developed in *Accumulation of Capital*, was "non-Marxist." Arendt interprets Luxemburg's "non-orthodox" views on imperialism, her disagreements with other contemporary socialists such as Lenin, and her insistence upon a realist, rather than ideological, analysis of society, as indications of a political orientation that "it might be doubted that she was a Marxist at all."<sup>20</sup>

In Arendt's existing oeuvre, there is no mention of Luxemburg prior to the first publication of *Origins* in 1951. It is difficult to know for certain how and to what extent Blücher's thoughts on Luxemburg influenced Arendt in the period between their meeting in 1936 as exiles in Paris, and the first published reference to Luxemburg in Arendt's work. Because Blücher was not a public writer, the role that Luxemburg had in the development of Blücher and Arendt's political ideas can only be gleaned from their letters. As Arendt would later write about the romantic and political partnership between Luxemburg and Leo Jogiches, "we shall never know how many of Rosa Luxemburg's political ideas developed from Jogiches: in marriage, it is not always easy to tell the partner's thoughts apart."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Arendt, 148.

<sup>19</sup> Arendt, 148.

<sup>20</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 38, 39–40.

<sup>21</sup> Arendt, 46.

It is clear that Blücher himself underwent a transformation in his own thinking on politics and philosophy. In a letter dated 1948 to Arendt he described his discovery of a “new territory” of political thought in which the philosophical “giants and the titans” were juxtaposed to a roughly outlined republicanism: “Kant was a servant, Nietzsche a master, Marx a despot and Kierkegaard a slave. And I am a *prospective citizen*.”<sup>22</sup> Young-Bruehl interprets this change in Blücher’s thinking as concurrent to Arendt’s own interest in developing a new philosophical approach to politics.<sup>23</sup> During this period Arendt produced *The Human Condition* and bore witness to the Hungarian Revolution, with its spontaneous emergence and appearance of workers councils. Arendt’s own turn from the bleak outlook of *Origins* to the more hopeful possibilities expressed in works produced after 1958 marks a change in the role Luxemburg played in her thinking.

### **The Hungarian Revolution: “To the Memory of Rosa Luxemburg”**

The seemingly spontaneous emergence of the revolution in Hungary and the formation of councils fascinated Arendt and made Luxemburg’s ideas and participation in the 1919 uprising seem particularly relevant. Arendt would publish her reflections on the Hungarian Revolution in the same year in *The Human Condition* (1958). Prior to these pieces, Luxemburg was a marginal figure in only one of Arendt’s works. Starting with “The Hungarian Revolution and Totalitarian Imperialism,” Arendt would portray Luxemburg as a model revolutionary; a revolutionary who understood that the only goal of a revolution is freedom. Arendt’s model of Luxemburg would conform as much to the new political language developed in *The Human Condition*, as would

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<sup>22</sup> Arendt to Heinrich Blücher, July 29 1948, in *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher 1936-1968*, 95. Emphasis in original.

<sup>23</sup> Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 238.

with Luxemburg's notion of spontaneity and commitment to democracy. Arendt articulated this through the framework of her ontological concept of Natality, the possibility of creating a new beginning, and the three categories of the *Vita Activa*: Labor, Work, and Action. The period of 1956-1958 thus marks a major change in Arendt's conception of Luxemburg; a change that occurred as part of Arendt's development of the philosophical language in *The Human Condition*.

Arendt's reflection on the Hungarian Revolution marks a turn from the bleak portrayal of totalitarianism in *Origins* to the possibility of hope that regular people can resist oppression and spontaneously organize councils that are "the only alternative for a democratic government in the modern age."<sup>24</sup> Arendt writes:

If there was ever such a thing as Rosa Luxemburg's "spontaneous revolution," this sudden uprising of an entire people for the sake of freedom and nothing else—spontaneous, and without the demoralizing chaos of a military defeat preceding it, without *coup d'état* techniques, without a closely knit apparatus of professional conspirators and revolutionaries, without even a leadership of a party, something that everyone, conservatives and liberals, radicals and revolutionaries, have discarded as a noble dream—it was then we had the privilege of witnessing it.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Hannah Arendt, "The Hungarian Revolution and Totalitarian Imperialism," in *Thinking Without a Bannister: Essays in Understanding 1953-1975* (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), 136. Arendt's reflections on the Hungarian Revolution appears in several places, including as an epilogue to the second edition of *Origins of Totalitarianism*. The version used here is the recently published translation of the German language version "*Die Ungarische Revolution und die totalitäre Imperialismus*."

<sup>25</sup> Arendt, 109.

The emergence of councils in the modern era, the era of the decline of democratic principles and the rise of totalitarianism, signified to Arendt that the hope of democracy persevered. According to Arendt and Blücher, Luxemburg stood at the first such moment in the modern era during the January Uprising in 1919. As Blücher wrote to Arendt after she had been compared to Rosa Luxemburg at a lecture in Germany in 1958, with the publisher of the German Edition of “The Hungarian Revolution,” Klaus Piper, in attendance: “I am very pleased that the *Ungarische Revolution* is coming out in Germany. If the young there have any inkling about Rosa Luxemburg, then it will do them good to be confronted by this first attempt to show what practical methods all obsolete powers use to exert political control over free people through fear.”<sup>26</sup>

The first draft of the German Edition of “The Hungarian Revolution” contained a dedication to Rosa Luxemburg, which simply read “to the memory of Rosa Luxemburg.”<sup>27</sup> Klaus Piper, of R. Piper & co., had reservations about the dedication, and wrote to Arendt that

This pamphlet is a passionate appeal on the essence and danger of totalitarian imperialism; concretely, to recognize correctly the communist regimes of violence. But this same pamphlet is dedicated to the woman who, according to the usual imagination of all that do not know, is to be counted among the pioneers of the same communism in Germany.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Heinrich Blücher to Arendt, July 14 1958, in *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher 1936-1968*, 335.

<sup>27</sup> Klaus Piper to Arendt, 3 September 1958, Correspondence File, 1938-1976, n.d. Publishers, 1944-1975, n.d. R. Piper & Co. – 1958, Jan.-Dec., The Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>28</sup> Piper to Arendt, 3 September 1958, Correspondence File, 1938-1976, n.d. Publishers, 1944-1975, n.d. R. Piper & Co. – 1958, Jan.-Dec., The Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. Letter translated by author.

Piper proposed the dedication: “to the memory of the liberal socialist Rosa Luxemburg, who did not want totalitarian communism.”<sup>29</sup> Arendt, however, decided not to include the dedication and responded:

If we have to explain in black and white what we mean, we must cut the dedication. Poor Rosa! She has been dead now for forty years, and still falls between all stools. Of course, I understand your reasons. I only ventured to do so in the first place because I was struck by the audience’s reaction at my lecture, which also came as quite a surprise to you. Perhaps the young people—and they were the only ones clapping!—know better again; For we agreed on the fact that they cannot all have been communists—who would have been the people not clapping! The dedication cannot be rephrased, because one would have to explain that Luxemburg was neither really a socialist nor a communist, but ‘only’ stood for justice and freedom and revolution as the only possibility for a new form of society and state.<sup>30</sup>

In her letter to Piper, Arendt indicates a desire to redeem Luxemburg’s legacy. After Arendt was compared to Luxemburg (“it seems invariably has to happen,” she wrote) during her summer 1958 talk in Munich, she wrote to Blücher that “I was very honored to have my name and Rosa Luxemburg’s mentioned in the same breath. At that the whippersnappers in the auditorium broke

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<sup>29</sup> Piper to Arendt, 3 September 1958, Correspondence File, 1938-1976, n.d. Publishers, 1944-1975, n.d. R. Piper & Co. – 1958, Jan.-Dec., The Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>30</sup> Arendt quoted from a letter in response to Piper that recently appears in: Jerome Kohn, “Postscript to ‘The Hungarian Revolution and Totalitarian Imperialism,’” in *Thinking Without a Bannister: Essays in Understanding 1953-1975*, ed. by Jerome Kohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), 156.

into spontaneous applause! But tell me please, where do they know her from? You can't find a single book of hers in the bookstores. Piper, e.g., barely knew anything."<sup>31</sup>

Ursula Ludz has written extensively on this period of Arendt's archival materials within German language scholarship. Arendt's association with Piper was centered on writing an "introduction to politics," along the same lines as Karl Jasper's (one of two sources of existentialist philosophy (*existenzphilosophie*) from Arendt's past; the other being Martin Heidegger), recently published "introduction to philosophy." Arendt wrote to Piper that she did not want the piece to be a work of "politics as science" (*Politik als Wissenschaft*) but instead as an exploration of the relationship between the Political and human existence (*menschlichen Dasein*).<sup>32</sup> As Ludz notes, because of lecture engagements (such as that in Munich) and travel, Arendt was not able to complete the introduction. However, it is indicative of the ways in which Arendt was perceiving political questions while she wrote *The Human Condition*, "The Hungarian Revolution," and began to develop the core of her portrait of Luxemburg. The relationship between the philosophical concepts developed in this period, particularly the concepts related to the relationship between *existenzphilosophie* and politics, will be further explored in section two.

The legacy that Arendt wishes to resurrect is the idea of Luxemburg as a very particular kind of revolutionary—one who sought freedom and nothing else. "The Hungarian Revolution" marks the first point where Arendt explicitly erases Marxism from Luxemburg's thinking. Both in the text and in her letter to Piper, Arendt describes Luxemburg as interested only in freedom, a

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<sup>31</sup> Arendt to Heinrich Blücher, July 1958, in *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher 1936-1968*, 333.

<sup>32</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Was ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlass*, ed. Ursula Ludz (Munich: R. Piper GmbH & Co KG, 1993), 137.

definition of a genuine revolutionary whom Arendt would later write about in *On Revolution*. The reason why Luxemburg was “neither really a socialist nor a communist” is unclear in the text; there are indications of why, in the philosophical concepts that Arendt wrote about in *The Human Condition*. The separation of economic from political concerns in the three categories of the *Vita Activa*, Labor, Work and Action, that Arendt describes in *The Human Condition* is replicated in the purely political goals and aspirations of Luxemburg and the worker’s councils which spontaneously emerged in Hungary. Yet already the separation between economic and political issues emerged in “The Hungarian Revolution.” As Arendt writes, “it is quite doubtful whether the political principles of equality and self-rule can readily be applied to the economic sphere.”<sup>33</sup> Section two will address the role that the concepts developed in *The Human Condition* played in Arendt’s further understanding of Luxemburg’s own ideas and political goals.

*On Revolution* expands upon Arendt’s claims in “The Hungarian Revolution” that the goal of all revolutions is freedom and the “lost treasure” of all modern revolutions since the French Revolution, is what Arendt calls “the council system.” Arendt reiterates Luxemburg’s role as an observer who “pointed out with such amazing clear-sightedness” the gulf between the aspirations of professional revolutionaries with their “ready-made formulas” and the spontaneous emergence of councils.<sup>34</sup> In *On Revolution*, Arendt is concerned with linking the revolutionary drive for freedom with “the possibility of founding a permanent, lasting, enduring body politic.”<sup>35</sup> Arendt argues that the initial urge for freedom, the revolutionary spirit, the spontaneous emergence of councils as a plural act aiming for freedom, must be incorporated into a new political formation. Arendt argues that Thomas Jefferson, with his support for

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<sup>33</sup> Arendt, “The Hungarian Revolution and Totalitarian Imperialism,” 135.

<sup>34</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1963), 264.

<sup>35</sup> Arendt, 36.

incorporating the local ward system into the constitutional republic, reflected the possibility of capturing the revolutionary spirit in a new political state.<sup>36</sup>

*On Revolution* centers on the distinction between revolutionaries and the spontaneous origins of revolution itself. By distinguishing between the actions of “professional” revolutionaries from the spontaneous origin of revolutions, Arendt aimed to show that no revolutionary caused a revolution via his or her own actions. *On Revolution* is a piece that relies upon distinctions drawn within the modern history of revolutions to extract “the lost treasure” of the revolutionary tradition: the council system. Arendt argued that the spontaneous emergence of councils in a variety of revolutionary moments is the manifestation of the drive for freedom, which lies the core of humanity’s capacity for political action. The importance of spontaneity, from the French Revolution to the Hungarian, is central to Arendt’s understanding of the ontological origins of revolutionary political action, or *Natality*, because no revolutionary actor could account for the “emergence and reemergence of the council system ever since the French Revolution.”<sup>37</sup> The “lack of continuity” between the emergence of councils is clear evidence to Arendt of the “spontaneity of their coming into being.”<sup>38</sup>

Throughout *On Revolution*, revolutionaries find themselves surprised by, or discovering, the reemergence of councils. For example, Arendt describes the signatories of the Mayflower Compact as able to “discover, almost by inadvertence, the elementary grammar of political action and its more complicated syntax, whose rules determine the rise and fall of human power... what they discovered, to be sure, was no theory of social contract in either of its two

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<sup>36</sup> Arendt, 249.

<sup>37</sup> Arendt, 261-262.

<sup>38</sup> Arendt, 262.

forms, but rather the few elementary truths on which this theory rests”<sup>39</sup> Arendt argues, that Jefferson knew that freedom must have an institutional home in the new republic, yet he knew it “however dimly.”<sup>40</sup> Arendt’s reading of these revolutionary figures does not require that they are philosophically aware of the elementary language of politics. In fact, because this language is ontological, she reads Jefferson and Luxemburg’s commitment to spontaneous emergence of revolutions and councils as an awareness, however “dim,” of the ontological origins of their thought. Thus one could say of Arendt’s interpretation of “the Russian Revolution,” what she would later write of Jefferson and the American Revolution:

Still, though this was a new freedom they were aiming at, it would be hard to maintain they had no prior notion of it. On the contrary, it was a passion for this new political freedom, though not yet equated with a republican form of government, which inspired and prepared those to enact a revolution without fully knowing what they were doing.<sup>41</sup>

Arendt thus inverts the traditional Marxist understanding of bourgeois and proletarian revolutions, based upon her understanding of the goal of revolution being freedom and the emergence councils as indicators of a genuine revolution. Instead, she draws the line between those professional revolutionaries who tried to create social revolutions and thus created new forms of oppression, such as Robespierre and Lenin, and those who understood, however dimly, that revolution emerges from the spontaneous actions of people, such as Luxemburg and Jefferson. As Arendt portrayed in *On Revolution*, the differences are parallel to Robespierre’s

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<sup>39</sup> Arendt, 173-174.

<sup>40</sup> Arendt, 235.

<sup>41</sup> Hannah Arendt, “‘The Freedom to Be Free:’ The Conditions and Meaning of Revolution,” in *Thinking Without a Bannister: Essays in Understanding 1953-1975*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), 373.

“despotism of liberty” and Condorcet’s observation that “the word ‘revolutionary’ can be applied only to revolutions whose aim is freedom.”<sup>42</sup>

Luxemburg and Jefferson are an atypical pairing. What draws these revolutionaries together in Arendt’s work is not political ideology, but instead their understanding of the spontaneous emergence of freedom within councils and their attempts to encapsulate the councils into the creation of new, durable republics (Jefferson’s Ward System, Luxemburg’s *Räte* during the German Revolution). In *On Revolution*, in an argument that mirrors Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin in “The Russian Revolution”, Arendt states that an entirely new form of government can be created by channeling the “spirit of revolution” through republican institutions. As Luxemburg wrote on the importance of maintaining democratic institutions, “the living fluid of the popular mood continuously flows around the representative bodies, penetrates them, guides them.”<sup>43</sup> There is a similarity between Luxemburg’s “popular mood” and Arendt’s “revolutionary spirit.” As Arendt would write, council republicanism could ensure that the revolutionary spirit is captured “for political freedom, generally speaking, means the right ‘to be the participator in government,’ or it means nothing.”<sup>44</sup> The difference between their revolutionary theories and the role that the organization plays meant that Luxemburg and Arendt had divergent views on revolutionary strategy, as well as on the nature of democratic politics that they envisioned would be nourished by the energy of a revolutionary struggle. Section four will further explore this difference.

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<sup>42</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, “The Russian Revolution,” in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Kevin B. Anderson and Peter Hudis (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 301.

<sup>44</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 218.

In 1966, Arendt got her chance to engage in Luxemburg's legacy in her review of Peter Nettl's biography of Rosa Luxemburg. Arendt's essay in *Men in Dark Times* was originally published as "A Heroine of Revolution," in *The New York Review of the Books* in that year. It was a synthesis of the previous threads of Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg. The personal affinities between Arendt and Luxemburg emerge several times in the piece, both in the much referenced comparison between the relationships of Arendt and Blücher, and of Luxemburg and Jogiches, and in Arendt's own willingness to speculate on the thoughts and motivations of Luxemburg.<sup>45</sup>

In the *NYRB* review, Arendt described Nettl as "practically unknown."<sup>46</sup> In a letter to Arendt, Robert Silvers, editor of the *NYRB*, told Arendt that he did not know much about him, but that he lectured at the University of Leeds and had been a successful private businessman.<sup>47</sup> This last fact intrigued Arendt greatly, enough that she mentioned it in a letter to Karl Jaspers, writing "and the man who wrote the book, Nettl, completely unknown. Rumor has it that he's a businessman!—as if he were [Luxemburg's] last suitor."<sup>48</sup> Nettl was precisely the kind of "out of step" persona to whom Arendt was drawn. Nettl was born in the Sudetenland in 1926 to a family involved in the fur industry.<sup>49</sup> He studied at Oxford after his family relocated to the UK, and was a successful fur trader until 1961, when he left to pursue an academic career at the University of

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<sup>45</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Hannah Arendt, "A Heroine of Revolution," *The New York Review of Books*, October 6, 1966.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Silvers to Hannah Arendt, 7 April 1966, Correspondence File, 1938-1976 n.d. Publishers, 1944-1975, n.d. *New York Review of Books-1963-1966*, The Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>48</sup> Hannah Arendt to Karl Jaspers, August 10 1966, in *Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (New York City: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992), 650.

<sup>49</sup> T. J. Nossiter, A. H. Hanson, and Stein Rokkan, eds., *Imagination and Precision in the Social Sciences: Essays in Memory of Peter Nettl* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), 1.

Leeds.<sup>50</sup> His career was cut tragically short when he was killed in a plane crash in 1968.<sup>51</sup>

Arendt's review was republished in a compilation of essays in honor of his memory. The editor, A. H. Hanson, compared Nettl to Luxemburg by writing that Nettl was "Jewish, central European, cosmopolitan, bold, intellectually adventurous and with a contempt for mediocrity...he also shared with his subject an artistic sensitivity, a personal fastidiousness, and an anxiety to keep the personal life in a separate compartment from the public. The result of this meeting of minds across the years is a portrait of unusual depth and intimacy."<sup>52</sup>

In addition to his biography, Arendt also read Nettl's essay "The German Social Democratic Party 1890-1914 as a Political Model," in which he outlined the curious "pariah position" that the party came to play in Imperial German political society.<sup>53</sup> The role of the internal political struggles within the SPD and its "betrayal" in supporting the First World War play a central role in Arendt's essay. While she was writing her review, Arendt read Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky, and developed an idiosyncratic interpretation of the role the two played in Luxemburg's personal and political trajectory. While writing the piece, she reported to Jaspers that Bernstein was "a very intelligent man. But what a repulsive hypocrite Kautsky was."<sup>54</sup> As with her understanding of revolutionaries in *On Revolution*, Arendt judges the major figures of the SPD on the terms of categories like Action from the *Vita Activa*. Arendt's distaste for Kautsky comes from her articulation of the classic debate between reform and revolution as one of action and inaction within society. Arendt understands Kautsky's commitment to

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<sup>50</sup> Nossiter, Hanson, and Rokkan, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Nossiter, Hanson, and Rokkan, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Nossiter, Hanson, and Rokkan, 8.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Nettl, "The German Social Democratic Party 1890-1914 as a Political Model," *Past & Present*, no. 30 (April 1965): 80–81.

<sup>54</sup> Hannah Arendt to Jaspers, August 10 1966, in *Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969*, 650.

revolution, against Bernstein's revisionism, as justification for inaction and the continuation along the path of a "state within a state."<sup>55</sup> In contrast, despite Luxemburg's passionate attacks on Bernstein's "reformist" position, Arendt writes "Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg...had in common that they were both honest (which may explain Bernstein's 'secret tenderness' for her), analyzed what they saw, were loyal to reality and critical of Marx."<sup>56</sup>

Arendt, by reframing the debate within German socialism as one between inaction and action, whether reformist, electoral or revolutionary, misses the nuance of Luxemburg's interparty political maneuvering. Luxemburg opposed both Bernstein's reformism and Kautsky's theoretical rigidity and inaction, in accordance with her belief in political struggle as a *method* of raising class consciousness amongst workers. The result of Kautsky's strategy, while paying lip service to revolutionary strategy, amounted to inaction. As a result, Kautsky's position was revolutionary in theory, but amounted to reformism in practice.<sup>57</sup> This hypocritical position is almost certainly the source of Arendt's hostility towards Kautsky.

It is this separation of action from inaction that Arendt utilizes to articulate Luxemburg's perceived republican program. Arendt also claims that "it is indeed the republican question rather than the national one which separated her most decisively from all others."<sup>58</sup> Yet, as Leszek Kolakowski notes, republicanism was the program of the vast majority of the Marxist socialists in the Second International, because "a bourgeois republic could not itself carry out the socialist programme, but it provided better conditions for the proletariat to carry on the fight."<sup>59</sup> Arendt

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<sup>55</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 49-50.

<sup>56</sup> Arendt, 50.

<sup>57</sup> Nettl, "The German Social Democratic Party 1890-1914 as a Political Model," 81.

<sup>58</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 52.

<sup>59</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. 2 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 361.

portrays Luxemburg's post-1910 "strategy of friction" as an attempt to escape the SPD's "pariah position" of inaction and to preserve the revolutionary spirit. Arendt argued that Luxemburg "did not intend to spend her life in a sect" and that "her commitment to revolution was primarily a moral matter, and this meant that she remained passionately engaged in public life and civil affairs, in the destinies of the world."<sup>60</sup>

The emergence of Luxemburg's moral concern with revolution is the only major new aspect of Luxemburg's portrait provided by Arendt in *Men in Dark Times*. In another example of Arendt's inference of Luxemburg's personal motivations, she cites the source of Luxemburg's moral commitment in the "moral taste" she shared with her Polish-Jewish peer group from the Social Democrats of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL). Arendt writes of this "moral taste, which is so different from 'moral principles'; the authenticity of their morality they owed to having grown up in a world that was not out of joint."<sup>61</sup> Margaret Canovan identifies the relationship between private morality and public political action as a unique feature of Arendt's understanding of the motivating strength and limitation of political principles. While these principles can be contradictory or even lead to terrible political conclusions, for Arendt, private morality could act as a compass through which right political action could be navigated. Morality can thus be used to decide private actions, but:

There is also political action, which is distinguished from private action not by lack of principles, not necessarily even being inspired by different principles (since loyalty, for example, could inspire both), but simply by the *direction* of moral commitment; by being

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<sup>60</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 51.

<sup>61</sup> Arendt, 41.

directed to the public world, like Rosa Luxemburg's or Lincoln's, rather than to personal relations like Antigone's.<sup>62</sup>

For Arendt it is the personal morality of Luxemburg and her peer group, directed outward from the private to the public realm, that acts as a kind of compass towards right action. The distinctions between private/public and social/political begin to blur in the same manner as the personal and theoretical aspects of Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg. The role of Luxemburg's personal life in Arendt's portrait is to identify the sources of private moral commitment and the manner in which it is transformed into a public, political commitment. It is to this moral commitment that Arendt ascribes Luxemburg's political motivations, rather than a commitment to a Marxist theoretical understanding. The role of this movement from private to public life will be explored further in section three.

Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg is strongest in the areas where she describes Luxemburg's commitment to spontaneity and public freedom. Arendt recounts both Luxemburg's experience witnessing the Soviets during the Revolution of 1905, and her debate with Lenin during the Revolution of 1917. Arendt draws the connection between spontaneity and the importance of "the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion."<sup>63</sup> There is an affinity between Arendt's theory of Nality/public freedom and Luxemburg's theory of spontaneity. Arendt's idea of the spontaneous emergence of councils and the importance of capturing the "revolutionary spirit" in a post-revolutionary political organization is similar to Luxemburg's belief in the importance of the spontaneous possibilities

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<sup>62</sup> Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, 175. Emphasis in original.

<sup>63</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 54; Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution," 306–7.

of the masses and of the necessity to channel “the living fluid of the popular mood” through political institutions.<sup>64</sup> Yet even these similar political concepts are impacted by Arendt’s framing of her political ideas through the strict separation between the categories of the Political and the Social. Section two will focus on the ways in which Arendt’s philosophical foundations to her political theories impact her understanding of Luxemburg.

It is important to hesitate before referring to a unified Luxemburgian theory of revolution and socialist democracy. As Martin Jay rightly points out, Luxemburg never succeeded in unifying her economic analysis and her theory of spontaneity.<sup>65</sup> Her brutal murder meant that the pieces of her thoughts on revolution and democracy, written during the events often in shorter, less theoretical pieces, mean that her legacy has been open and greatly contested. The construction of “Luxemburgisms” is entwined with the creation of her legacy. The openness of her theoretical writings, her untimely death and her position as both a supporter and critic of the Bolsheviks, as well as her murder that was blamed directly on the ascendant SPD, led to a legacy too often tied to the internal battles of both the socialist and communist movements of the twentieth century.<sup>66</sup>

Luxemburgism itself was a creation of the conflicts in the KPD and in the early years of the socialist revolution. Georg Lukács’ essays on Luxemburg in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) were the first attempt to craft a unified Luxemburgian theory. As Nettl

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<sup>64</sup> Luxemburg, “The Russian Revolution,” 301.

<sup>65</sup> Martin Jay, “The Political Existentialism of Hannah Arendt,” in *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 247.

<sup>66</sup> See the detailed discussion of the impact of Luxemburg’s thought on the development of German Communism in: Eric D. Weitz, “‘Rosa Luxemburg Belongs to Us!’ German Communism and the Luxemburg Legacy,” *Central European History* 27, no. 1 (1994): 27–64.

observed, this was in direct relation to the problem posed by the public emergence of “The Russian Revolution” in 1922 and the need to categorize Luxemburg in the newly dividing factions of international socialism.<sup>67</sup> The result was the creation of Luxemburgism as a revolutionary precursor to Leninism—correct in its revolutionary orientation, but wrong on the issues of the dictatorship of the proletariat. A second version of Luxemburgism emerged during the political struggles of the early KPD in which Blücher took part. Luxemburgism as an “Ultra Left” deviation, which Nettl described as “what Trotskyism was to Stalin in Russia, Luxemburgism became for the Stalinists or Bolshevizers in Germany: the local version of Trotskyite indiscipline and error.”<sup>68</sup> Arendt responded to this version of Luxemburgism by seeking to extract Luxemburg from the image of Luxemburgism created by socialist and communist infighting and to valorize those very traits that the official communist line had denigrated: her critique of Lenin, faith in democracy and commitment to revolutionary spontaneity. Thus it may be possible to articulate Arendt’s interpretation of Luxemburg as a kind of counter-interpretation to the Soviet aligned version.

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<sup>67</sup> J. P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso Books, 2019), 794.

<sup>68</sup> Nettl, 799.

## Section 2. Rosa Luxemburg and *Existenzphilosophie: The Human Condition*, the Social, and Modernity

The reception of Arendt's political theory has been marked by critics who see a difference between her abstract philosophical language and idealized image of a Periclean, *polis* in *The Human Condition*, and Arendt's other works that display a commitment to political realism.<sup>69</sup> The concept of the Social in particular, has troubled theorists trying to adapt Arendt's work to the reality of modern politics. In *The Blob, Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*, Hannah Pitkin uses the metaphor of a "blob" to describe a category that Arendt filled with all the conditions of modern life which she felt threatened the idealized political structures developed in *The Human Condition*. The "monstrous" nature of the Social is such that any attempt to grasp Arendt's political philosophy as a whole will either have to reckon with untangling the knot of the Social, or bypassing it entirely. The problem, that the concepts in *The Human Condition* are ontological in nature, implies that the work is the foundational language of politics. With this understanding, Arendt describes politics in her other more politically realist works. As a result of this and the anti-modern implications of the Social, theorists have been divided on the applicability of Arendt's political thought to the modern era. Critical responses to Arendt's theory, such as those from Martin Jay and Richard Wolin, focus on the ontological and existential basis of Arendt's political thought, rooted in Aristotelean concepts and *existenzphilosophie* inherited from Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. In contrast, those sympathetic to Arendt's approach, such as Seyla Benhabib, identify avenues through which Arendt's work is applicable to the modern world by decentering *The Human Condition* from her thinking. Arendt's interpretation of the Social and theory of Action underscores her portrait of

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<sup>69</sup> Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, 237.

Luxemburg. Arendt presents her concept of the Social as central to her critique of Marx in *The Human Condition*.

The ontological political concepts presented in *The Human Condition*, the *Vita Activa*, Arendt's critique of Marx and, most importantly, the contrast that Arendt articulates between the categories of the Political and the Social, are central to understanding her portrait of Luxemburg. For example, in *On Revolution*, Natality, the capacity that humanity possesses to create an entirely new beginning, is connected to Arendt's understanding that "only where this pathos of novelty is present and where novelty is connected with the idea of freedom are we entitled to speak of revolution."<sup>70</sup> Natality, first introduced in *The Human Condition*, is thus the ontological basis of Arendt's understanding of revolution.

The Social is a concept that is much debated by scholars of Arendt. In Hannah Pitkin's detailed study, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*, she analyzes the various ways that Arendt described the Social; Arendt never gave a clear definition, but articulated the Social as an ever growing threat in the modern world against three concepts, which Pitkin argues Arendt "treated as almost synonymous: 'action,' politics,' and 'freedom.'"<sup>71</sup> Pitkin identifies several potential meanings of the Social, from the separation of politics and economics, to tyrannical forms of government including totalitarianism, and the decline of human agency in the modern world. Yet against all forms of the Social, Arendt juxtaposed a democratic ideal, modeled roughly on an idealized Greek *polis* and based on her ontological

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<sup>70</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 34.

<sup>71</sup> Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1.

concepts of Natality, Plurality, and Action.<sup>72</sup> Arendt's theory of council republicanism, and thus her portrait of Luxemburg, rests upon a foundation of these concepts.

*The Human Condition* is primarily a work of philosophy, an attempt to rethink the philosophical origins of politics. As such, the influence of *existenzphilosophie* via Heidegger and Jaspers, and classical Aristotelian political theory are essential to understanding the ontological conceptual language and articulation of ideas in *The Human Condition*. In contrast to Heidegger's view that human phenomenological existence (being-in-the-world) is individual, Arendt framed human existence as plural—influenced by Karl Jaspers' thought on communication—and claims: "existence itself is, by its very nature, never isolated. It exists only in communication and in awareness of other's existence...existence can develop only in the shared life of human beings inhabiting a given world common to them all."<sup>73</sup> This phenomenological category of plurality is an equality of sameness and difference since each person has their own unique individuality.<sup>74</sup> From plurality, Arendt then interpreted Aristotelian ethics and politics to differentiate the various aspects of human private and public life in *The Human Condition*. Aristotle's influence in how he "distinguished three ways of life (*bioi*) which men might choose freedom" as Arendt's *Vita Activa*.<sup>75</sup> Arendt describes the three conditions of

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<sup>72</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 247. "The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action that are capable of by virtue of being born."

<sup>73</sup> Hannah Arendt, "What Is Existential Philosophy?," in *Essays in Understanding* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), 186.

<sup>74</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Arendt, 12.

the *Vita Activa* as Labor, Work, and Action. Action, which takes place in the *polis* (the public realm) arises from Natality and Plurality.<sup>76</sup> In contrast to Labor and Work, Action:

has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.<sup>77</sup>

Labor is the category of the *animal laborans*, the physical labor humans must engage in to survive, while work is the realm of *homo faber* and represents the construction of the man-made objects by which humans make the world which they inhabit.<sup>78</sup> The Social emerges from modernity as the growth of Labor and Work, a “curiously hybrid realm” of private and public, that increasingly threatens politics.<sup>79</sup> Through a strict separation between the categories of the human condition, Arendt separates the political and public realm from that of the economy and the Social—a view that reflected the Aristotelean division between the *oikos* (private household space) and the *polis* (public space of politics).<sup>80</sup>

Action encompasses the human capacity to create new political worlds, the ontological root of direct democracy in human plurality, the *polis* as a model for institutionalizing the spark of freedom, and the space for the immortalization of human words and deeds through political action. In short, it is equally as broad a category as the Social. What further distinguishes the political aspects of Action from the Social is a question of agency—Action implies those areas in

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<sup>76</sup> Arendt, 7.

<sup>77</sup> Arendt, 9.

<sup>78</sup> Arendt, 7.

<sup>79</sup> Arendt, 35.

<sup>80</sup> Arendt, 24. “According to Greek thought, the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home (*oikia*) and the family.”

which the ontological conditions of Plurality and Natality can be expressed. Arendt argues that while Labor, Work and Action are all political in nature, only Action is “specifically *the* condition” of politics.<sup>81</sup> The Social, in contrast, generates human impotence.

Beyond a distinction between economics and politics, the Social encompasses the spread of social conformity, a kind of closeness that eliminates the distance necessary for the expression of individual human uniqueness, the result of plurality: “from the viewpoint of the world and the public realm, life and death and everything attesting to sameness are non-wordly, antipolitical, truly transcendent experiences.”<sup>82</sup> Arendt draws a distinction between the kind of equality present in plurality—a “togetherness” that takes place in democratic public spheres—and that which is a creation of the rise of the social—“this unitedness of many into one”—a result of projects not dedicated to the creation of exclusively political, public spaces.<sup>83</sup>

Connecting the arguments of *Origins of Totalitarianism* to the new language of *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that tyrannical forms of government, in which a distance between people shrinks, violate the ontological condition of plurality “which is the condition of all forms of political organization.”<sup>84</sup> As result, the space where freedom is possible is eliminated by the shrinking “iron band” of totalitarian terror.<sup>85</sup> In contrast to the institutions of democratic governance that generate political power through public participation, Tyranny “generates...impotence as naturally as other bodies politic generate power.”<sup>86</sup> The Social is a force that wears down the ontological conditions of human action, which is the *raison d'être* of

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<sup>81</sup> Arendt, 7.

<sup>82</sup> Arendt, 215.

<sup>83</sup> Arendt, 214.

<sup>84</sup> Arendt, 202.

<sup>85</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 466.

<sup>86</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 202.

politics. In *On Revolution*, this is the “lost treasure” of revolution, the rediscovered human capacity for newness and freedom which is the very core of politics.

Arendt’s portrait of Luxemburg corresponds to the opposition between the Social and the category of Action. The portrait thus reflects Arendt’s categorization of the *Vita Activa* and her ontological politics. At times, this creates a fascinating dialogue wherein Luxemburg and Arendt’s commitment to political action and the spontaneous revolutionary actions of ordinary people can illuminate questions of revolution, democracy and public freedom in the modern era. At other moments, the murky nature of the Social, and her reliance upon a form of traditional republicanism, replicate the problems of the Social in her portrait and shoehorn Luxemburg into a role that strays far from the realities of socialist politics in the era of the Second International. This is particularly true in Arendt’s articulation of Luxemburg as revolutionary heroine in the mold of the idealized Periclean heroism of Athenian democracy presented in *The Human Condition*, which Arendt proposes as the model for council republicanism in the modern world. The most extreme example of the influence of Arendt’s ontological politics on her portrait of Luxemburg is the extrusion of Marxism and any Marxist ideological motivations from Luxemburg’s politics.

### ***Animal Laborans* and Arendt’s Interpretation of Marxism**

For the purposes of understanding Arendt’s portrait of Luxemburg, an understanding of Marx’s relationship to the Social explains Arendt’s extrusion of Marxist influence from the socialist revolutionary. Arendt’s critique of Marx is based on her understanding of the distinction between Labor/Work and Action. Arendt argued that Marx’s understanding of the capitalist world, the world in which labor first appeared in public, in fact reinforced capitalism’s valorization of labor. Following her Aristotelean separation of the *polis* and *oikos*, Arendt

described labor as the simple maintenance of human physical necessities. The encroachment of the Social in the modern world is driven by capitalism's raising of labor to the public realm, which, according to Arendt is the realm of Action and politics alone. The rise of labor and the Social are linked together, as Arendt writes "the social viewpoint is identical...with an interpretation that takes nothing into account but the life process of mankind, and within its frame of reference all things become objects of consumption."<sup>87</sup> Classical political economy emerged during this rise of labor/the Social and

From this purely social viewpoint, which is the viewpoint of the whole modern age but which received its most coherent and greatest expression in Marx's work, all laboring is 'productive,' and the earlier distinction between the performance of 'menial tasks' that leave no trace and the production of things durable enough to be accumulated loses its validity.<sup>88</sup>

According to Arendt, Marx's mistake was to assume that labor was the political terrain upon which freedom could be won by releasing "socialized" *animal laborans* from toil, "so that if it is not spent and exhausted in the drudgery of life it will automatically nourish other, 'higher,' activities."<sup>89</sup> However, the Social, with its deleterious effects on human life, reduces the full human capacities which are reflected in the realm of Action and politics to the state of *animal laborans*, for whom this free time is never spent on anything but consumption."<sup>90</sup> Arendt argues that Marx conflated Labor with Work, the latter of which is the realm of *homo faber* and is more closely related to Action as the creation of space in which politics are possible. Thus Arendt

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<sup>87</sup> Arendt, 89.

<sup>88</sup> Arendt, 88–89.

<sup>89</sup> Arendt, 133.

<sup>90</sup> Arendt, 133.

contrasts the higher planes of work and action in politics—the creation of a public sphere which is linked ontologically to the human capacity for freedom—from “socialized mankind” which “is the unfortunately quite unutopian ideal that guides Marx’s theories.”<sup>91</sup>

Arendt’s impression of Marx is split between “Marx the revolutionary” and “Marx the political economist.” At times, Arendt expresses admiration for Marx’s revolutionary passion and his attention to empirical detail. As Pitkin argues, Arendt’s criticism of Marx, which focuses on economic and social issues, reflects a more hidden influence.<sup>92</sup> Pitkin speculates that if Arendt were able to expand upon this and other similarities between her own thinking and Marx’s (such as a similarities between the world-alienation of the Social and Marx’s theory of alienation), a much more productive dialogue on freedom, politics and labor could be opened: “she might, in short, have insisted on the need to teach people explicitly about action, politics, the lost treasure, might even have counterposed Tocqueville to Marx for this purpose and attempted a synthesis of their ideas.” While Arendt describes the Social as a problem of the growth of “laboring society” at the expense of politics, she also imagines it as an alienating force that renders people impotent and unable to change their political circumstances.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt draws a distinction between the “economic” and “political” aspects of the labor movement. However, rather than a typical understanding of trade unionism and socialist political parties, Arendt interprets this split as one based on the separation of politics and the Social: “the people’s political aspirations” are contrasted with trade unionism, which itself was a product of the rise of *animal laborans*. Arendt describes how two aspects of labor emerged in two moments of revolution:

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<sup>91</sup> Arendt, 89.

<sup>92</sup> Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social*, 115.

A distinction appeared only in those rare and yet decisive moments when during the process of a revolution it suddenly turned out that these people, if not led by the possibilities of democratic government under modern conditions, had their own ideas about the possibilities of democratic government under modern conditions. In other words, the dividing line between the two is not a matter of extreme social and economic demands but solely of the proposition of a new form of government.<sup>93</sup>

Most importantly, Arendt draws a firm line between the people's aspirations in the movement and party programs and economic interests. In another indication of Arendt's concerns over the strength of the rise of the Social, she writes:

The historical destinies of the two trends in the working class, the trade-union movement, the people's political aspirations, could not be more at variance: the trade unions, that is, the working class in so far as it is but one of the classes of modern society, have gone from victory to victory, while at the same time the political labor movement has been defeated each time it dared to put forth its own demands, as distinguished from party programs and economic reforms.<sup>94</sup>

Arendt's understanding of the two-fold nature of working class action is a reflection of the understanding of the Social. While Arendt frames trade-unionism as successful in the economic realm, she relates the difficulties in transforming those economic actions into real political results. Is this another possible similarity between Arendt and Luxemburg's understandings of the relationship between political and economic struggles? Certainly if one were to take

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<sup>93</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 216.

<sup>94</sup> Arendt, 216-217.

Luxemburg's long clash with the reformism of Eduard Bernstein, then the similarities in their positions are very clear:

In thus making the abandonment of the socialist labor movement an essential condition and a social presupposition for the preservation of bourgeois democracy today, [Bernstein] proves in a striking manner that this democracy is in complete contradiction with the development of modern society. At the same time, he proves that the socialist labor movement is itself a *direct product* of this tendency.<sup>95</sup>

Luxemburg chastises Bernstein for forcing the socialist trade unions to abandon their revolutionary political goals in favor of gaining legitimacy inside the very political regime that caused their necessary creation in the first place. Arendt's own articulation of the reform versus revolution debate is quite different.

In *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt praises Bernstein for his appraisal of the political reality of the SPD and connects this with her interpretation of Luxemburg's own critical approach to Marxism. Arendt harshly critiques Karl Kautsky's devotion to Marxist theoretical orthodoxy and perpetuation of the "pariah position" of the SPD.<sup>96</sup> By doing so, Kautsky denies the necessity of political action, relying upon his theoretical understanding of the growth and downfall of capitalism, all of which is a product of the rise of the Social. In Arendt's understanding, political action is necessary to escape from this very reality which would result in the bureaucratization of society and the degradation of human freedom. It is difficult to reconcile exactly why Bernstein's

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<sup>95</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, "Social Reform or Revolution," in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Kevin B. Anderson and Peter Hudis (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 154. Emphasis in original.

<sup>96</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 50; Nettle, "The German Social Democratic Party 1890-1914 as a Political Model," 81.

commitment to Action, reformism and trade union strategies is something that fits Arendt's criteria for political action except insofar as it differs from Kautsky's strategy of political inaction.

Thus the role of the Social is crucial in Arendt's extrusion of Marxism from her portrait of Luxemburg, and in her interpretation of the party life *within which* Luxemburg's political thought developed. Arendt articulated an image of Luxemburg based on her own concept of Action and corresponding notion of a genuine revolutionary. Arendt separated revolutionaries by their commitments to political freedom and their understanding of the source of freedom in the spontaneous actions of people. Jefferson and Luxemburg are linked as republican revolutionaries in contrast to Robespierre and Lenin, not because they are ideologically similar, but because their commitment to public freedom is more central to Arendt's understanding of what constitutes politics than their more "ideologically" committed contemporaries. Arendt interprets Luxemburg's critique of Lenin in "The Russian Revolution," not as a debate amongst Second International socialist revolutionaries, but as a more fundamental philosophical distinction between political freedom and the deleterious effects of the Social that would arise in the twentieth century. Arendt's concerns about the rise of the Social are similar to Luxemburg's regarding the rise of bureaucracy and party apparatchiks in the Soviet Union. This version of Rosa Luxemburg fits most neatly Arendt's larger philosophical project as explicated in *The Human Condition*. Luxemburg's defense of political institutions as the conduits for channeling the political energy of the masses into the new post-revolutionary political institutions is very similar to Arendt's own ideas regarding the relationship of human plurality and the category of Action in *The Human Condition* and on the revolutionary spirit in *On Revolution*.

Any synthesis of Arendt's commitment to classical republicanism and Luxemburg's socialism is made difficult by Arendt's ontological political concepts. By incorporating socialism into the realm of politics, Arendt would be conceding the elevated position that her republicanism has to all other political ideologies, which are merely products of the Social. Reconciling her republicanism with Marxism would further place Arendt's theories into the scope of an historical moment, while her ontological politics are explicitly trans-historical: because of *Natality*, the impulse for freedom emerges spontaneously again and again without continuity. The rise of the Social is an historical phenomenon, freedom is ontological. Lastly, because the Social is explicitly juxtaposed to Action, where the Social is anti-political and Action is *the* category of politics, Arendt's philosophy not only stands in the way of a synthesis of democracy and socialism, but would also result in socialism undermining the very conditions of politics itself.

### **The Political and Arendt's Relationship to Modernity**

The relationship between the concepts developed in *The Human Condition* and real, modern historical events is a source of debate over Arendt's relationship to modernity. Arendt's concept of the Social is explicitly linked to a variety of social, economic and political conditions of the modern world. The ontological language deployed in *The Human Condition* stands in stark contrast to Arendt's other works on specific historical events, such as *On Revolution*, or her various essays which cover contemporary events such as the Hungarian Revolution or the reflections on Watergate in "Lying in Politics (1972)." The contrast between Arendt's republicanism in *The Human Condition* and the threats implicit in modernity is particularly increased by Arendt's support of "heroism," "greatness," and "immortality." The latter can be

won in the public arena, while the Social threatens to flatten people into mediocrity (mere *animal laborans*).

In *Permanent Exiles*, Martin Jay argues that the categories of *The Human Condition*, indebted to *existenzphilosophie* via Heidegger and Jaspers, bear striking similarities to the theories of the political existentialists of 1920's Germany, such as Carl Schmitt and Ernst Jünger. While opposing their political convictions and ideas (such a comparison is exceptionally fraught with tension because of the political existentialists' role in presaging the rise of fascism), Jay argues that Arendt shared the basic conviction of the autonomy of the political realm from the rest of society: "thus, she saw politics not merely as irreducible to socioeconomic forces, but also as unhampered by all normative or instrumental constraints as well, a position often known as 'decisionism.' As its own end, politics should not be conceived as a means to anything else whether it be domination, wealth, public welfare, or social justice: in short, *politique pour politique*."<sup>97</sup> Jay also argues that Arendt shares the political existentialist rejection of history as a source of political action or legitimacy, in favor of individual political action that is able to escape its constraints.<sup>98</sup> For Arendt, it was necessary to oppose historicism because it allowed for political action that would not be determined by the weight of historical events or trends, such as the emergence of the various conditions of modernity that she aligned with the Social.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes that Action is a category distinct from ordinary human behaviors in that: "action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary."<sup>99</sup> The space

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<sup>97</sup> Martin Jay, *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1985), 242.

<sup>98</sup> Jay, 243.

<sup>99</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 205.

created for politics is less for deliberation, and instead for speech-making, for a kind of immortality that could arise from an idealized Periclean *polis*. Richard Wolin argues that this position is as much a result of Arendt's Aristotelean influence as it is of *existenzphilosophie* inherited from Heidegger, in which the political arena is articulated as "a matter of *existential self-affirmation*: a terrain of virtuoso performance and individual bravado, a proving ground for authenticity."<sup>100</sup> In response to her perception of the Social's corrosive impact on the political life, Arendt's political vision portrays modernity's expansion of political concerns into the Social realm as the erasure of politics itself. Arendt's vision of the *polis*, or in the modern era the emergence of worker's councils, thus represent an antimodern political vision in which economic equality, social issues and mass society generally are seen as impediments to political freedom. Arendt's category of the Social, the threat to politics, is also the means by which democratic politics have become more egalitarian, and her description of a voluntarist politics of greatness can thus be seen as a deeply anti-egalitarian vision.

More than any other work by Arendt, *The Human Condition* makes it difficult to categorize her political ideas. The centrality of the text in her thought, and the degree to which one accepts the rigidity of the boundaries between her ontological concepts, determines the extent to which Arendt's thought is able to be incorporated into a modern context. Extracting a positive assessment from the categories of Arendt's council republicanism requires either dismissing the ontological basis of the categories or accepting that the Social itself is a source of political action. Jürgen Habermas worked with Arendt's notion of the public sphere but rejected its ontological implications. In *The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere*

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<sup>100</sup> Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 69.

(1962), Habermas quotes Arendt's discussion of the changing relationship between public and private life during the onset of modernity.<sup>101</sup> Yet while Habermas accepted the change in the private/public relationship, particularly the expansion of the *oikos* of the household to the creation of market economies, he articulated this change as one of a historical rather than ontological analysis. In his historical analysis, Habermas identifies a process of communicative publics *within* the social realm. Thus he avoided Arendt's institutional argument that some form of direct democracy, councils modeled on the *polis*, are necessary to give substance to freedom.

Seyla Benhabib questions the centrality of *The Human Condition* in interpretations of Arendt's thought, by arguing that Arendt was a "reluctant modernist," someone who, while not enamored with modernity, worked within its social and political frameworks rather than against it. Benhabib agrees with Pitkin that the sharp separation of economic and political matters in *The Human Condition* is not defensible in reality.<sup>102</sup> Benhabib does not see Arendt's writings on politics as always dependent on a foundation of the phenomenologically essentialist concepts developed in *The Human Condition*.<sup>103</sup> Influenced by Habermas, Benhabib aims to ground Arendt's political thought on less ontological terms than *The Human Condition*, such as her essays of political commentary. In reference to Arendt's comments on the European labor movement in *The Human Condition*, Benhabib writes "taking Rosa Luxemburg's side in her dispute with Lenin, Arendt emphasized rather the transformative and politically educative aspects of the economic struggle: it was the process of struggle that transformed the *animal laborans* into a citizen of a potentially new public sphere."<sup>104</sup> Rather than interpreting Arendt's

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<sup>101</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1962), 19.

<sup>102</sup> Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 158.

<sup>103</sup> Benhabib, xlv, 123-124

<sup>104</sup> Benhabib, 143-44.

separation of economic and political aspects of the working class movement stemming from her ontological framework, Benhabib articulates the separation as one wherein the economic concerns of the working class are transformed into political aspirations and demands that enter a newly transformed public sphere. Benhabib writes “engaging in politics does not mean abandoning economic or social issues; it means fighting for them in the name of principles, interests, values, that have a generalizable basis, and that concern us as members of a collectivity.”<sup>105</sup>

The central question in Arendt’s relationship to modernity is her category of the Political, which ushers in the creation of new political institutions and the public space contained therein, and places her relationship to modernity at stake. The transformation of social and economic concerns into public spaces either means that Arendt is using phenomenological concepts to describe how to reclaim the “lost treasure” of Action within a modern context, or, as Arendt’s writings on revolution often make more clear, that politics is a realm which emerges distinctly and against the Social and is embedded in the founding of new institutions. Arendt’s council republicanism then, is either the democratic framework for bringing more public energy into the public sphere, or it is the *polis* reborn, the spontaneous emergence of the human capacity for new beginnings and freedom *in spite* of the dehumanizing conditions of the modern world. In fact, according to Arendt’s writings, councils are often both simultaneously.

Arendt insists upon councils as the necessary component to imbue the institutions of republicanism with the spirit of revolution. While she does focus on the role that the creation of a public sphere has towards invigorating democracy, it is not the source of the invigoration.

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<sup>105</sup> Benhabib, 145.

Institutions, rather, are *the* underlying ontological condition of the human capacity for politics, and the source that channels the revolutionary spirit and ensures the political space where a public sphere can form. In *On Revolution*, Arendt argues that the American Revolution represents such a moment, and it is the institutional failure to incorporate Jefferson's ward system that threatens to degrade American democracy.<sup>106</sup> Arendt's insistence that direct democracy is superior to representative democracy rests on an institutional rather than conceptual argument. Similarly, it is the spontaneous emergence of councils that forms the hope for an entirely new form of government.<sup>107</sup> While at times Arendt's conception of politics means both the creation of a new public sphere and the creation of concrete political institutions, it is the institutional meaning that serves as the basis for a conception of the political that begins at Natality and ends at a public sphere.

If much of Luxemburg's portrait is a reflection of the ontological basis of Arendt's council republicanism, it is not possible to decenter the importance of *The Human Condition* without also jettisoning Luxemburg as a model revolutionary. If Arendt's council republicanism is displaced from her political thinking, so also is the necessity of Natality and the creation of directly democratic institutions. If the main goal of Arendtian thought is the establishment and maintenance of public spaces where political judgements can be made, Arendt's revolutionary thought becomes less necessary. However, there is one fruitful avenue of analysis from Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg that may remain; the relationship of the private to the public realm.

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<sup>106</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 253.

<sup>107</sup> Arendt, 249.

### Section 3. “A Gift for Un-Belonging:” Pariahs, Parvenus, and Revolutionaries

One of the most striking similarities between Arendt and Luxemburg is their mutually complicated relationship to women’s movements and their reception in feminist theory. Arendt was famously reluctant to associate herself with the growing women’s liberation movement of her time unless the specific issues were elevated to a wider political arena. As Elizabeth Young-Bruhl notes, Luxemburg’s similar position played out between herself and her friend Clara Zetkin, one of the leaders of the Socialist women’s movement: “Rosa Luxemburg tried to convince her friend that the oppression of women, like the oppression of Jews, would only come to an end with the advent of true socialism. Arendt, without advocating socialism or any other program, thought that women’s issues should be part of a larger political struggle.”<sup>108</sup> Like her wider political outlook, “incipient in her criticism of the women’s movement is the distinction she later drew between social questions and political questions—the latter, she held, should be the focus of action.”<sup>109</sup>

To view either Arendt or Luxemburg as simple opponents of women’s liberation would do a disservice to perspectives and political ideas that are much more nuanced. Raya Dunayevskaya argued that Luxemburg’s hesitancy to be associated with the “women question” in Social Democracy had as much to do with a commitment to wider revolutionary goals as with her refusal to be placed in that position by the male-dominated leadership of the party. Dunayevskaya emphasized Luxemburg’s commitment to supporting women’s suffrage and the wider women’s movement throughout her time in the SPD.<sup>110</sup> Thus it is necessary to temper the

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<sup>108</sup> Young-Bruhl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 97.

<sup>109</sup> Young-Bruhl, 97.

<sup>110</sup> Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution* (Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981), 89–90.

strength of Arendt's claim of Luxemburg's "distaste for the women's emancipation movement, to which all other women of her generation and political convictions were irresistibly drawn."<sup>111</sup>

This, however, does not mean that the question of gender limits Arendt or her analysis of Luxemburg. In fact, it is an opening through which a more fruitful political dialogue can take place. While Arendt shared Luxemburg's "distaste for the women's emancipation movement," it was of greater importance to Arendt that "she was an outsider, not only because she was and remained a Polish Jew in a country she disliked and a party she came soon to despise, but also because she was a woman."<sup>112</sup> The affinity between the two thinkers as outsiders plays an important role in Arendt's understanding of Rosa Luxemburg's relationship to her private life, and to her own commitment to a political and public life. As Jacqueline Rose noted of Luxemburg: "un-belonging was her strength."<sup>113</sup>

To search for the political meaning of this sense of un-belonging, it is necessary to address Arendt's understanding of the dynamic between private morals and public politics. Both thinkers were hesitant to politicize the personal, but it is precisely through this dynamic that a more fruitful subtext of Arendt's portrait emerges. As Rose writes in *Women in Dark Times* (the title inspired by Arendt's own "dark times"), "that the personal is political is a well-worn feminist claim."<sup>114</sup> Approaching Arendt and Luxemburg this way is useful precisely because they agreed upon a separation between private and public life. The challenge is not to collapse their political views into a personal psychohistory, but instead to see the ways in which the connection

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<sup>111</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 44.

<sup>112</sup> Arendt, 44–45.

<sup>113</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *Women in Dark Times* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 30.

<sup>114</sup> Rose, x.

between private motivations and politics can challenge Arendt's own insistence on the separation of politics and economics that marks her portrait of Luxemburg.

Arendt's portrait of Rahel Varnhagen provides hints as to the connection between this personal/political dynamic at work. This portrait, which aims to "narrate the story of Rahel's life as she herself might have told it," is at once an investigation of the German-Jewish socialite's attempt to navigate the world of eighteenth century Prussia as a woman and assimilated Jew and, as Young-Bruehl and many others have pointed out, a meditation on Arendt's own turn from introverted, subjective romanticism to the issues of the world.<sup>115</sup> Arendt portrays Varnhagen's predicament as the choice between a pariah and a parvenu. A pariah as a Jew and woman, Arendt portrays Varnhagen as taking the path of the parvenu, pursuing gentile suitors, operating an enlightened salon and attempting to gain acceptance into high society. The trade-off that Varnhagen makes, according to Arendt, is to live her life as a lie. As a result, Varnhagen's inward turn towards romantic introspection was not a satisfactory solution to her dilemma. The book concludes with Varnhagen's return to identification with her Jewishness (as a pariah), but with a renewed positive perspective, and a rejection of the individual isolation and dishonesty of the life of a parvenu.<sup>116</sup>

Arendt began to write *Rahel Varnhagen* in Berlin in 1929, but it was not published until 1957, well into her life in America. The work contained several of the concerns that would later influence Arendt's existentialist concepts in *the Human Condition*—most notably an early version of the concept of the Social as a distinctly modern phenomenon. Her notions of pariah

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<sup>115</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, ed. Liliane Weissberg, trans. Clara Winston and Richard Winston, 1st ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1957), 81; Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 56–59.

<sup>116</sup> Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, 258.

and parvenu, both marked by the individual involvement in the social world, would later give way to political concerns that only emerge on the margins of the central narrative of *Varnhagen*. Hannah Pitkin identifies several of these moments in the text where a third, political option is mentioned for pariahs.<sup>117</sup> Arendt argues that this political option, such as a political struggle for equal rights, was not open to Jews of Varnhagen's era.<sup>118</sup> This political option, not possible during Varnhagen's era but certainly during Arendt's, may be an indication of how to view Arendt's interpretation of Luxemburg's relationship to *her* otherness and her wider political aspirations. Like Arendt's own identification with Varnhagen's struggle between private inwardness and a public life, Luxemburg and Arendt insist on the centrality of political action to any public life.

Arendt interpreted Luxemburg's otherness and that of her comrades in the SDKPiL as a preeminent political virtue. This "peer group," was comprised mainly Jewish intellectual-activists from Poland, whom Nettl distinguishes from the party organizers of the SPD, or the professional revolutionary Bolsheviks. Arendt argues that it is the distinctive Jewish middle class background, and that:

without which the emergence of the ethical code of the peer group would be nearly incomprehensible. The hidden equalizer of those who always treated one another as equals—and hardly anybody else—was the essentially the simple experience of a childhood world in which mutual respect and unconditional trust, a universal humanity and a genuine, almost naïve contempt for social and ethnic distinctions were taken for granted. What members of the peer group had in common was what can only be called

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<sup>117</sup> Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*, 30.

<sup>118</sup> Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, 88.

moral taste, which is so different from “moral principles”; the authenticity of their morality they owed to having grown up in a world that was not out of joint.<sup>119</sup>

It is this sense of universal values that Arendt attributes to a European identity amongst this radical group of the Jewish intelligentsia. Their experience of otherness is transferred into a universal political experience. Yet Arendt argues that this is precisely where Luxemburg’s internationalism was mistaken. Luxemburg placed much of her energy in Socialist Internationalism, and the SDKPiL was notable precisely for its stance against any kind of nationalism. For Arendt, Luxemburg’s support of the notion that “the fatherland of the working class is the socialist movement” is a clichéd statement with no real political meaning. Arendt argued that a movement is not a “land.”<sup>120</sup> Instead, Arendt reads Luxemburg and her peer groups internationalism as, at best, a warning of the terrible nationalism to follow in the decades after her death.

Arendt agrees with Nettle, that it would be “‘lamentably absurd’ to discover in [Luxemburg’s] anti-nationalism ‘a particularly Jewish quality.’”<sup>121</sup> Arendt was careful to draw a distinction between this notion and one of middle class intellectuals who are able to articulate their status as others into specifically Nietzschean “good Europeans”; defined not by a stereotype of cosmopolitan rootlessness, but by an embracing of universal European values. As Rose notes, “for Arendt, it is paradoxically her cosmopolitanism which shows how profoundly Luxemburg was in fact Jewish-identified.”<sup>122</sup> What this paradoxical view encapsulated was the complex interrelationship to which Arendt would often hint, wherein the private, moral and particular

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<sup>119</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 41.

<sup>120</sup> Arendt, 42–43.

<sup>121</sup> Arendt, 42.

<sup>122</sup> Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, 60.

concerns were elevated into the Political—all the ways in which, perhaps despite her opinions on the social realm, connections are made between the Social and Political, and the private and the public. It is the politicization of the status of otherness, an avenue not to available to Rahel Varnhagen, that seems to have been open to Rosa Luxemburg and her comrades, if only temporarily, and if only to presage the darkness to come.

The Social is the undercurrent that lies beneath the surface of the argument: the peer group is defined by moral taste and devotion to one another rather than any sort of ideological commitment to socialism. Arendt disagrees with Netti's assessment that Luxemburg's participation in party affairs was a result of an intense ambition towards a party career. An ambitious pursuit of a party career would not mark Luxemburg as a revolutionary who sought higher principles than the bureaucratic, stultifying life of party politics that Arendt associated with the Social. Instead of seeing Luxemburg's writings as occurring *within* her party life—a life spent immersed in internal party politics and attempts to steer party policy in revolutionary directions—Arendt attributes Netti's reading to “the natural force of a temperament capable, in her own laughing words, of ‘setting a prairie on fire,’ which propelled her almost willy-nilly into public affairs.”<sup>123</sup> Arendt referred to the “moral standards” of the “peer group” for whom “such things as ambition, career, status, and even mere success were under the strictest taboo.”<sup>124</sup> Careerism, in this sense, is too close to the world of the Social, whereas Action/politics must be driven by a commitment to higher motivations. Any connection between a party career in Social Democratic politics and the wider political possibilities of that party are made impossible by Arendt's understanding of party politics as part of the anti-political phenomenon of the Social,

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<sup>123</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 44.

<sup>124</sup> Arendt, 44.

rather than a political actor itself. Luxemburg's own understanding between the role the party plays in channeling the spontaneous energy of the masses is lost in Arendt's juxtaposition between party politics and the moral and elevated political aspirations and sense attributed to her. Arendt's contrast of the "peer group" to the SPD is best understood as this juxtaposition of politics to the Social, rather than the various dynamics of Second International Socialism that Nettl emphasizes.

### **Unlikely Feminists**

As Benhabib notes, a more fruitful exercise is to search at the margins for the feminist subtext of Arendt's work and, in the process, displace the centrality of *The Human Condition* and its philosophical-political concepts.<sup>125</sup> Reinterpreting the salons of *Rahel Varnhagen*, Benhabib presents these women-dominated spaces as an alternative to what she interprets as the male-dominated space of the *polis* in *the Human Condition*. By displacing the center of Arendt's thought from the councils and *polis* (indicative of the realm of Action), Benhabib removes the source of the autonomy of the Political and recognizes the public sphere of the salons as an alternative source of a modern public space that does not fall into the ontological boundaries of the *polis*. This is one possible interpretation of Luxemburg's "peer group," as an alternative public space of moral trust and intimacy in political action. The "peer group" also fits Benhabib's view of the commonality between the salons and *polis* insofar as they were based on a profound equality between members, and "contribute to the formation of a 'civic friendship,'

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<sup>125</sup> Seyla Benhabib, "The Pariah and Her Shadow: Hannah Arendt's Biography of Rahel Varnhagen," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 86.

either among a group of citizens or among a group of private, like-minded individuals who can gather for a common political purpose.”<sup>126</sup>

However, in the case of Arendt’s portrait of Luxemburg, this decentering displaces not only the philosophical claims in *The Human Condition* but also her conception of Luxemburg as a model revolutionary. Benhabib’s goal—to focus on the creation of public space—also has an institutional requirement of Arendt’s work that can only come from the presupposition of spontaneous political action by the public. The salons or Luxemburg’s peer group are not the same as the *polis* because they are neither the source of political action (for Arendt, no revolutionary can create a revolution), nor are they the spaces at the outcome of the revolution. Luxemburg serves as a model revolutionary for Arendt, an indication of the validity of the ontological political concepts in her thinking. By removing the *polis* as the goal of a revolution and focusing instead on the public space of the Salon, Benhabib opens an avenue for a reinterpretation of Arendt’s commitment to a universalist public sphere, but also displaces the revolutionary aspects of Arendt’s thinking in which Luxemburg is a key figure.

Rose emphasizes the strengths that Luxemburg’s position as an outsider brought to her, which “also gave her a kind of freedom to think the un-thought, to force the unthinkable into the language of politics.”<sup>127</sup> Rose argues that Luxemburg’s position challenged the judgements and norms of the socialist party establishment precisely because of the freedom that this outsider status provided. What emerged from Luxemburg’s position as an outsider was an ability to articulate particular social issues within a larger political universalist context. As Arendt notes in *Origins*, Luxemburg “refused to read the Dreyfus affair, for example, as a Jewish matter, seeing

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<sup>126</sup> Benhabib, 100.

<sup>127</sup> Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, 35.

it in terms of the struggle of socialism against militarism and clericalism, which it also was.”<sup>128</sup>

Rose makes a similar connection to Luxemburg’s writing on imperialism, in which she is able to grasp the overall political struggle, while comparing the plight of European Jews under anti-semitism to that of the racialized violence inflicted upon Europe’s imperial subjects. Arendt draws this connection out in much more detail in *Origins*.<sup>129</sup> The point here is not to collapse the specificities of the particular struggles into a wider political framework, but instead to heed the complex interconnectedness of social, economic and political issues. As Rose writes:

It was not that women’s demands should come second to class struggle, but that everyone should be free—a lesson today’s “post-feminism” might heed. Everything was connected. This we might say is still the true meaning of socialist feminism—that women cannot possibly emancipate themselves while ignoring the inequities of a rampantly unequal world.<sup>130</sup>

As Maria Tamboukou argues, the feminist revival of these two unlikely feminist figures is based on precisely this connection between Arendt and Luxemburg’s mutual position as women participating in politics that bridged the personal and political.<sup>131</sup> A contrast emerges in Arendt’s idealized political sphere, in which politics are elevated above social and economic issues, and in Luxemburg’s dialectical vision of the interconnected nature of those struggles.

Again, the divergence between Luxemburg and Arendt is clearest in the treatment of ontological politics. However, avenues of analysis, such as those explored by Benhabib or Rose,

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<sup>128</sup> Rose, 59-60.

<sup>129</sup> Rose, 59.

<sup>130</sup> Rose, 65.

<sup>131</sup> Maria Tamboukou, “Imagining and Living the Revolution: An Arendtian Reading of Rosa Luxemburg’s Letters and Writings,” *Feminist Review*, no. 106 (2014): 39.

point to the possibility of elevating specific social issues out of the Social and into the public sphere and universalist political discourse. This movement from private motivations to political action does not necessarily end in a kind of Periclean democratic discourse. In fact, the example of Luxemburg shows just how fruitful the interrelationship between participation in social movements and political goals, such as civil rights and economic justice, can not only become intertwined, but can dialectically escalate towards an emancipatory vision. The difficulty lies in disentangling this subtext from Arendt's overall ontological project.

If Arendt's ontological politics are jettisoned in the same manner that Marxism is from Luxemburg, perhaps the connection between the Social and politics can be read in reverse: instead the threat of the Social to politics, the goal itself is the expansion of politics into the social realm—expanding the freedom of the *polis* into *oikos*. As Rose emphasizes, the key to understanding Luxemburg's approach is to focus on the interconnectedness of social, economic and political struggles. Luxemburg's dialectical method of understanding this approach to revolutionary theory is quite distinct from that of Arendt. The political concepts that most mark this distinction are the differences between Arendt's notion of Action and Luxemburg's dialectical method of *praxis*.

#### Section 4. Revolutionaries and Dark Times: Action and *Praxis* for our Time

Is it possible to imagine Arendt's theory as the creation of an inclusive public sphere and to rearticulate the Social as an analysis of the threats of modernity, but not its outright rejection? Pitkin proposes the possibility of a synthesis between Arendt's theory of the Social and the concept of alienation. She argues that if the boundaries between the Political and Social were loosened, and Arendt was able to interpret Marx's theory of alienation as a similar phenomenon to her idea of the Social, then such parallels could be fruitful (it is, of course, not Pitkin's assertion that Marx and Arendt could have such different theories completely reconciled).<sup>132</sup> However, in the case of Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg, this possibility is again confounded by her role as an example of Arendt's own revolutionary theories. Ernst Vollrath attempts such a synthesis in "Luxemburg's Theory of Revolution," but in the process collapses Luxemburg into many of Arendt's underlying political frameworks articulated in *The Human Condition*. The result is a non-dialectical interpretation of Luxemburg as a liberator of the proletariat from political impotency at the hands of capitalism. In contrast, Georg Lukács is able to grasp the full dialectical dimension of Luxemburg's thought. A comparison of Arendt's concept of Action with Luxemburg's dialectical method and *praxis* results in completely differing visions of democracy and its relationships to modernity. Furthermore, Lukács also opens the door to reframing a comparative analysis of Luxemburg and Arendt within the contemporary period.

In "Luxemburg's Theory of Revolution," Ernst Vollrath attempts an Arendtian reading of Luxemburg's theories. Following Arendt's critique of Marx in *The Human Condition*, Vollrath argues that Marx saw revolution as a means to achieve socialism, rather than as a separate

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<sup>132</sup> Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*, 140.

phenomenon in itself. This is because “to Marx, as to Orthodox Marxism, the political realm and all action in it are secondary and derivative in kind.”<sup>133</sup> Vollrath analyzes Luxemburg’s writings along the same lines of Arendt’s, distinguishing between the moment of revolution and ensuring the freedom won in a new form of government. To address the moment of revolution, he maps Arendt’s theory of Action onto Luxemburg’s concept of spontaneity from the “The Mass Strike.” Vollrath acknowledges Luxemburg’s view that politics and economics are deeply entwined, but reads this from the perspective of Arendt’s distinction between the Social and the Political. In Vollrath’s reading, the proletariat as such are mere *animal laborans*, reduced by capitalism to a state where any meaningful engagement in the political realm is denied to them.<sup>134</sup> The mass strike, political action on the part of the proletariat, liberates them from these constraints and transforms the proletariat into full citizens as the revolution brings this democratic substance to formal republicanism. The unity of economics and politics, for Vollrath, is thus articulated along the lines of the Social and the Political from *The Human Condition*: capitalism disempowers the political capacity of humans by reducing them to proletarians; through political action, the proletariat are liberated not just from capitalism but from the limitations of the *socio-economic* realm generally. At no point in Vollrath’s articulation of Luxemburg’s revolutionary theory does socialist democracy become anything more than an exclusively political democracy now made more substantial by the incorporation of the revolutionary spirit.

Furthermore, Vollrath’s argument, that the proletariat undergoes a transformation into political subjects, is very close to Jay and Wolin’s critique that the political realm of Arendtian theory becomes a space of existential or individual actualization. At stake is not the issue that

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<sup>133</sup> Ernst Vollrath, “Rosa Luxemburg’s Theory of Revolution,” *Social Research* 40, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 86.

<sup>134</sup> Vollrath, 90.

politics should possess a transformative quality, but rather what the transformation entails. Capitalism assumes an all-encompassing weight, reducing humans to mere *animal laborans* in the same manner as the looming “monstrous” quality of the Social. While Vollrath quotes from Luxemburg’s “The Mass Strike,” “there is no separating [revolution’s] economic and its political element,” he posits this as a cause and effect argument: the economic sphere (Social) blocks the self-actualization of the workers when they are able to enter the political realm (Action).<sup>135</sup> Luxemburg’s own dialectical notion of Marxist method, however, relies upon a very different notion of *praxis*, one in which emancipation can occur through a transformation of the economic as well as political sphere. As Wolin argues, this notion of *praxis*, in which emancipation is available for the many, is quite different from the “antidemocratic ontological tradition.”<sup>136</sup> Yet while Luxemburg’s theory of *praxis* avoids the collapsing of economic factors into an autonomous political sphere, her socialist theory of revolution and democracy has limitations of its own that will be explored below.

One of the difficulties in analyzing Luxemburg’s revolutionary theory is the relationship between the economic development of capitalism and the spontaneous revolutionary potential of the masses. As Jay emphasized, Arendt focused on the subjective factor of Luxemburg’s theory of revolution while neglecting the objective.<sup>137</sup> Arendt praised Luxemburg’s willingness to disagree with Marx and her commitment to analyzing reality with a clear mind because “what mattered most in her view was reality, in all its wonderful and all its frightful aspects, even more than revolution itself.”<sup>138</sup> Arendt argued in *Men in Dark Times* that Luxemburg’s *Accumulation*

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<sup>135</sup> Vollrath, 90.

<sup>136</sup> Wolin, *Heidegger’s Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas and Herbert Marcuse*, 64.

<sup>137</sup> Jay, “The Political Existentialism of Hannah Arendt,” 247.

<sup>138</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 39.

*of Capital* was non-Marxist because it implied that capitalism was not a “closed system that generated its own contradiction and was ‘pregnant with revolution’” and thus the work “contradicted the very foundations of Marxian and Hegelian dialectics, which hold that every thesis must create its own anti-thesis.”<sup>139</sup>

Yet Luxemburg’s notion of spontaneity was not as divorced from her understanding of the economic reality of capitalism as Arendt believed. Nor was it as anti-dialectical as Arendt has claimed. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács frames Luxemburg’s revolutionary theory as rooted in the dialectical relationship between subjective and objective factors. The relationship between the economic factors that bring the possibility of revolution to the fore, and the necessity of channeling spontaneous worker action into great levels of political action is the dialectical relationship at the core of Luxemburg’s theory. Lukács writes “the proletariat is, then, at one and the same time the product of the permanent crisis in capitalism and the instrument of those tendencies which drive capitalism towards crisis.”<sup>140</sup> Luxemburg argued that spontaneous political action can be channeled by the revolutionary party and raise class consciousness. *Praxis*, the unity of theory of practice, is the result of Luxemburg’s revolutionary theory, in which “class consciousness is the ‘ethics’ of the proletariat, the unity of its theory and its practice, the point at which the economic necessity of its struggle for liberation changes dialectically into freedom.”<sup>141</sup> Lukács’ Hegelian Marxist interpretation of Luxemburg’s revolutionary theory is thus the opposite of Arendt’s. Arendt interprets Luxemburg’s belief in

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<sup>139</sup> Arendt, 39–40.

<sup>140</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 40.

<sup>141</sup> Lukács, 42.

spontaneity as indicative of her distance from a number of Marxist theoretical notions: dialectics, historical materialism and socio-economic questions.

Through the lens of Arendt's understanding of the Social, she interpreted Luxemburg's economic works as a rejection of more than just mechanistic Marxism. Arendt interpreted her comments on the cruel and racist violence against imperial subjects as an indication of a willingness to look at historical reality. Rather than interpreting Luxemburg's conflict with Eduard Bernstein and later, Karl Kautsky, as an attempt to chart a course between reformism and theoretical stagnation, Arendt positions the conflicts and debates along the lines of her own theories of Action and the Social as further proof that Luxemburg's main opponent was any sort of political strategy based on Marxian economic analysis. What Arendt misread was precisely the dialectical revolutionary strategy described by Lukács: Luxemburg could oppose Bernstein because spontaneous revolutionary action raised class consciousness, and could oppose Kautsky's inaction for the exactly the same reason. This does not indicate that Luxemburg rejected the "objective" factor that social and economic forces are not only related to the conditions of revolution, but, rather created the condition for spontaneous action and unity in revolutionary *praxis*.

Luxemburg's critique of Lenin's methods in "The Russian Revolution" and her insistence upon democratic institutions in which "the living fluid of the popular mood continuously flows" is the theoretically closest element between Arendt's and Luxemburg's political ideas.<sup>142</sup> Yet even this point is marked by Arendt's interpretation of Marxism. Arendt fails to grasp the second part of Luxemburg's critique in which she warns against both Bolshevik dictatorship, and

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<sup>142</sup> Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution," 301.

Kautsky's insistence on waiting for correct material conditions.<sup>143</sup> Luxemburg praises the Bolshevik's seizure of power throughout the text, not because the economic or social conditions were ripe, but because she believed that the socialist revolution itself was part of the dialectical process of creating the conditions for a socialist future. What Luxemburg called "socialist democracy" in the text is thus distinguished from "bourgeois democracy." While Kautsky wished to wait for economic conditions to be "ripe" for revolution and return to bourgeois revolution, and the Bolsheviks established a dictatorship in rejection of bourgeois democracy. For Luxemburg:

Socialist democracy begins simultaneously with the beginnings of the destruction of class rule and of the construction of socialism. It begins at the very moment of the seizure of power by the socialist party. It is the same thing as the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Yes, dictatorship! But this dictatorship consists in the *manner of applying democracy*, not in its *elimination*, in energetic, resolute attacks upon the well-entrenched right and economic relationships of bourgeois society, without which a socialist transformation cannot be accomplished.<sup>144</sup>

Luxemburg's dialectical method is thus quite distinct from Arendt's interpretation of her revolutionary inclination. Rather than a heroic revolutionary will towards "freedom and absolutely nothing else" or motivated by primarily ethical reasons, Luxemburg's revolutionary theory was a dialectical combination of social and economic analysis, and a belief in the political education of the masses through political action and participation. In short, Luxemburg's revolutionary theory was neither a rejection of socio-economic motivations for politics, nor a

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<sup>143</sup> Luxemburg, 307.

<sup>144</sup> Luxemburg, 308.

republicanism that rose above an ideological commitment to socialism—Luxemburg’s revolutionary theory was precisely this attempt to understand the relationship between socio-economic forces and political action and to reconcile the economic and political aspirations of socialist democracy.

Luxemburg’s commitment to democracy and freedom was not merely ethical, but instead perpetuated a legacy of the tradition of Second International Socialism, in which socialist democracy would be the fulfillment of the democratic potential of bourgeois society. As Norman Geras notes in “Democracy and the Ends of Marxism,” the Marxist legacy has often had a contested legacy on precisely the question of the role of bourgeois democracy in the creation of socialist democracy: “it was thought of by some as being in basic continuity with the major institutions of existing democracy, as a consolidation and enlargement of these. Others have viewed it rather as discontinuous with them, as a sharp, punctual break in an institutional process.”<sup>145</sup> Luxemburg’s robust defense of “democratic institutions” in “The Russian Revolution,” and her insistence on maintaining traditionally “bourgeois freedoms” such as freedom of speech and civil rights almost certainly places her in the former camp. In fact, as Stephen Eric Bronner notes, Luxemburg herself vacillated between throwing her support behind the emergence of councils (soviets) or republican institutions during the final revolutionary period of her life.<sup>146</sup> Unlike Arendt, for whom direct democracy was a necessary component of maintaining the revolutionary spirit, for Luxemburg it did not necessarily matter which institutions were in place, so long as they were conduits through which the democratic actions of

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<sup>145</sup> Norman Geras, “Democracy and the Ends of Marxism,” *The New Left Review* 203, no. 1 (February 1994): 93.

<sup>146</sup> Stephen Eric Bronner, “Rosa Redux: A Reply to David Camfield and Alan Johnson,” in *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy*, ed. Jason Schulman, Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 61.

the masses could operate. Bronner writes “It’s also time to squelch the myth propagated by Hannah Arendt about soviets arising in *every* revolution—unless you identify revolution only with those you like.”<sup>147</sup> The problem, of course, is that this is precisely what Arendt *did* think. Arendt associated the emergence of councils with the beginning of a revolution, and only their emergence was the sign of a true revolutionary moment. Luxemburg, however, was much more willing to adapt to political circumstances, not only because of the historical idea of transforming bourgeois democracy, but also because of her dialectical method of working within the objective political and economic realities of the existing situation.

Unlike the prescriptive political vision that Arendt believed was necessary, Luxemburg was careful to stress the unknowability of paths such a socialist democratic revolution could take. Against the Bolsheviks, Luxemburg writes: “what we possess in our program is nothing but a few main signposts which indicate the general direction in which to look for the necessary measures, and the indications are mainly negative in character at that” and yet “that is not a shortcoming but rather the very thing that makes scientific socialism superior to the utopian varieties.”<sup>148</sup> In a similar vein, the lack of a comprehensive political system in Luxemburg’s writing, a “Luxemburgism” is an advantage rather than a disadvantage.

As Jacqueline Rose argues, Luxemburg’s openness to spontaneity and the progression of revolution is a result of there being “for Luxemburg, something radically unknowable at the core of political life.”<sup>149</sup> Yet Rose suggests that this openness is itself indicative of the limits of the Enlightenment project, that reason is what is needed to navigate dark times.<sup>150</sup> However, there is

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<sup>147</sup> Bronner, 62.

<sup>148</sup> Luxemburg, “The Russian Revolution,” 305–6.

<sup>149</sup> Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, 33.

<sup>150</sup> Rose, xi–xii.

another possible reading of Luxemburg's open dialectical method that is not indicative of such a critique of the Enlightenment project. As Geras notes, the absence of any prescriptive political vision can also be read as the creation of "the space of democracy. It is an arena for that diversity, experiment and negotiation through which alone socialism can be created."<sup>151</sup> In "Social Reform or Revolution" (1899), Luxemburg quotes Marx from the *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, that in contrast to bourgeois revolutions, which emerge in one continuous burst of political activity, proletarian revolutions rise, are defeated, critique themselves and change, and then rise again.<sup>152</sup>

### **Revolution and Democracy**

The introduction of Marxist *praxis* creates an additional layer of analysis for any comparison of Arendt and Luxemburg. In contrast to Arendt's anti-historicist interpretation of revolution, a Hegelian-Marxist understanding of *praxis* requires an understanding of the historical reality of objective and subjective factors to every moment of critical analysis. Following Lukács, it must then be asked what kind of relevance and applicability Arendt and Luxemburg's understanding of revolution have to any contemporary political situation. Both thinkers have experienced renewed interest driven by political developments, such as the degradation of liberal democracy in the western world and the rise of far-right populism. Additionally, a new collected volume of Arendt's later writings, *Thinking Without a Bannister*, was published in 2019. In *Why Read Arendt Now* (2018), Richard Bernstein asks "Why this growing interest – and why especially the recent spike of interest in her work? Arendt was

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<sup>151</sup> Geras, "Democracy and the Ends of Marxism," 100.

<sup>152</sup> Luxemburg, "Social Reform or Revolution," 164; Geras, "Democracy and the Ends of Marxism," 96.

remarkably perceptive about some of the deepest problems, perplexities, and dangerous tendencies in modern political life. Many of these have not disappeared; they have become more intense and dangerous.”<sup>153</sup> Bernstein notes that Arendt’s perceptive discussions in *Origins* contain many troubling parallels to our own time: large numbers of stateless persons and migration crises, the increased normalization of nationalist and racist public discourse, and the troubling trend of what Arendt would call “lying in politics.” Bernstein is especially insightful on the latter, pointing out the dangers of an untruthful political discourse; the dangers that emerge when the shared political reality of a polity is disrupted by lying in a form of image making. Bernstein writes that “the difference between the traditional political lie and the modern lie is the difference between hiding something and destroying it.”<sup>154</sup>

Interest in Luxemburg has also grown in the contemporary period, albeit to a lesser extent. Peter Hudis argues that interest in Luxemburg, especially her economic writings (recently published as a collected works by Verso Books as part of a project to publish her entire collected works in English) has risen along with a general interest in Marxist theory since the 2008 economic crash.<sup>155</sup> One notable result of this rise in interest has been the republication of a new edition of Nettl’s biography of Rosa Luxemburg (2019). This renewed enthusiasm for Luxemburg’s thinking is quite different from the last period of interest in her work amongst the New Left. For this generation of Leftists, Luxemburg’s combined interest in revolutionary and democratic politics served as an alternative trajectory of real existing socialism since Stalin. As Bronner wrote in his earlier *Rosa Luxemburg: Revolutionary for our Times* (1980), “for there can be little doubt that many people still continue to picture the socialist society in terms of a Marx-

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<sup>153</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>154</sup> Bernstein, 78.

<sup>155</sup> Hudis, “Introduction: Luxemburg in Our Time,” ix-x.

Lenin-Stalin lineage. Rosa Luxemburg helps to articulate an alternative.”<sup>156</sup> Yet the historical circumstances of the era of the New Left are quite different from the contemporary period: the working class in the Western world is less organized and militant, the prospects of revolution much more dim and the threat of a return to “dark times” looms instead of the prospect of an emancipated society.

In “Red Dreams and the New Millennium: Notes on the Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg,” Bronner revises his assessment of Luxemburg’s legacy that he initially published in 1981. He argues that the conditions of a new historical reality require a reevaluation of her revolutionary ideas, not because they were ill suited to *praxis* in her time, but because they are ill suited to the contemporary period. The ensuing debate in the journal *New Politics* and collected in the book *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy*, between Bronner and his critics focused particularly on his claim that the reevaluation of Luxemburg is “a matter of freeing her thinking from an outmoded teleology and drawing political consequences.”<sup>157</sup> Bronner argues that simply copying Luxemburg’s revolutionary ideas, suited to a *praxis* between a mass socialist movement and the historical conditions of the early twentieth century, in our own time would not follow the *Marxist dialectical method* that Luxemburg herself employed.<sup>158</sup> Simply put: expecting that Luxemburg’s revolutionary ideas to apply to a time when they are not based in a subjective or objective reality would be a disservice to the very dialectical Marxist method of analyzing the reality of those

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<sup>156</sup> Stephen Eric Bronner, *Rosa Luxemburg: A Revolutionary for Our Times* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1987), 11.

<sup>157</sup> Stephen Eric Bronner, “Red Dreams and the New Millennium: Notes on the Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg,” in *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy*, ed. Jason Schulman, *Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice* (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 12.

<sup>158</sup> Bronner, “Rosa Redux: A Reply to David Camfield and Alan Johnson,” 66.

conditions within the contemporary political situation, or acting as part of a political movement accordingly.

Furthermore, Luxemburg's own position on socialist democracy showed serious problems in "The Russian Revolution." Her position in the text is more complicated than a simple critique of Bolshevik dictatorship as Arendt has articulated. Luxemburg, while accepting the complexity and speed of real political developments, praises the Bolsheviks for recognizing that "the real situation in which the Russian Revolution found itself, narrowed down in a few months to the alternative: victory of the counter-revolution or dictatorship of the proletariat."<sup>159</sup> For Luxemburg, supporting the Bolshevik seizure of power saved the revolution for the prospect of democracy, yet their tactics in doing so required maintaining the institutions of democracy. Luxemburg thus presents a kind of paradox, one in which the Bolsheviks must retain power but also maintain democracy—the possibility of losing power through the democratic institutions is not addressed. This position blurs the distinctions between bourgeois and socialist democracy: if the Bolshevik seizure of power ensures the possibility of democracy through those institutions of bourgeois democracy, what is the difference between socialist democracy once the revolution is successful? Likewise, if the Bolsheviks were voted out of power by those very same institutions, then in what sense is the revolution "socialist" at all? While the "objective" conditions of the revolution meant to Luxemburg that the Bolsheviks should seize power, what about the "subjective" conditions? In order to maintain power, the Bolsheviks would need to maintain the support of the majority of the population. Yet as Luxemburg writes in "The Russian Revolution," "the true dialectic of revolutions, however, stands this wisdom of parliamentary mores on its head: not through a majority to revolutionary tactics, but through revolutionary tactics to a

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<sup>159</sup> Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution," 287.

majority.”<sup>160</sup> Luxemburg’s theory of spontaneity means that the subjective factor of class consciousness of the proletariat grows as the organization channels its political energy through objective social conditions. Yet what happens if this majority does not materialize through revolutionary action? Furthermore, As Eric Weitz argues, even Luxemburg’s position on expanding the democratic sphere through the institutions of councils was of secondary importance to the revolutionary fervor of mass action, relegating democracy to secondary importance while elevating popular action.<sup>161</sup>

These questions on Luxemburg’s position on democracy would require an historical work in its own right that could better navigate the complexities and pace of historical events in Russia 1917 and Germany 1918-1919. For the purposes of this analysis, it is enough to show that as much as Luxemburg predicted the rise of bureaucratic despotism in the Soviet Union, her own theory of revolutionary spontaneity failed to materialize in either the Russian or the German revolution. Luxemburg’s dialectical theory of spontaneity and corresponding notion of *praxis* may be more useful tools for navigating the political realities of the modern world, particularly in their ability to grasp the importance of interrelatedness between economic and political spheres. Yet Luxemburg falls into a similar revolutionary romanticism as does Arendt’s theory of revolution. Any reliance on an “authentic” revolutionary politics per Luxemburg, or maintaining the urgency of her revolutionary ambitions in a time when the same historical or political conditions are not present, would be a mistake.<sup>162</sup> To do so would result in the creation of another “Luxemburgism:” the positioning of Luxemburg as an example of revolutionary voluntarism

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<sup>160</sup> Luxemburg, 289.

<sup>161</sup> Weitz, “‘Rosa Luxemburg Belongs to Us!’ German Communism and the Luxemburg Legacy,” 36–37.

<sup>162</sup> Bronner, “Rosa Redux: A Reply to David Camfield and Alan Johnson,” 63.

rather than a follower of Marx's dialectical method. Most notably absent from these conditions that made revolution possible for Luxemburg is the presence of a mass socialist party that could channel spontaneous energy of the masses into a socialist democracy.

A comparison of Arendt's concept of Action and Luxemburg's notion of *praxis* does bring two similarities in their political thinking to light: first, the subjective factor in revolution and democracy is emphasized as the element that brings substance to democratic institutions. In the case of Arendt, the revolutionary spirit captures the ontological category of Natality as the source of human freedom. Arendt argues that democratic societies must strive to maintain the revolutionary spirit in order to create a space of individual self-actualization possible in a democratic public sphere. Luxemburg's dialectical revolutionary theory relies upon the dialectical raising of consciousness amongst the proletariat in order to channel its energy through democratic institutions. In doing so, Luxemburg argues that revolutions bypass the parliamentary paralysis impacting parties such as the SPD, and thus bring the democratic energy of the masses to the fore. Both thinkers rely upon revolution as a means to bypass what they perceived to be the limitations of representative democracy.

It is ironic that the factor that Arendt juxtaposed to Luxemburg's commitment to spontaneity, the mass party, is precisely the aspect of Luxemburg's political thinking that is more relevant to our time. Without these components, it makes little sense to commit to an idealized socialist revolution, with no mass support and no effective organizational apparatus to carry it out. Yet Luxemburg's own thinking relies upon the channeling of revolutionary energy to bring about socialist democracy as a "higher form" of democracy. Thus the relevance of Luxemburg to the contemporary situation is precisely those parts of Arendt's analysis that most contradict her ontological distinction between Action and the Social, of which Luxemburg serves as a model:

contemporary political reality calls not for revolutionary politics, but patient movement and organization-building. What an analysis of Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg reveals is not only the distance between Arendt's ontological politics and Luxemburg's Marxism, but also their shared interest in a politics of exception that lowers the value of the mundane aspects of democratic processes in favor of revolutionary passion and action.

If revolution is no longer a central feature of relevance to Luxemburg's thinking, as Bronner argues, then what remains outside of her revolutionary theory? Luxemburg's understanding of the distinction between socialist and bourgeois democracy relies upon raising class consciousness among the proletariat in order to become the majority of a post-revolution democratic socialist society. If this class-oriented revolutionary theory is jettisoned, then all that would remain would be, on one hand, the committed romantic revolutionary that Arendt reinterpreted in her portrait, or on the other, a more classical Marxist analysis of economic and political conditions in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century capitalist political economy. If Luxemburg's position on democracy is superior to Arendt's, it is in the incorporation of the interrelatedness of economic and political realities within an understanding of what democracy could be, and the reality of patient and organizational political work with which to bring it out. As Bronner argues, "what would more socialism involve? Nothing other than that the working class itself share in the formulation of socio-economic policy, express its unrecognized demands in political terms, and begin to build its own public culture."<sup>163</sup> In contrast to Arendt, Bronner argues that "such concerns are fundamental to Rosa Luxemburg's vision of socialism which seeks an *extension* of democracy through the socialization of the means of production—to deepen the workers' own capacities for self-administration. Thus the democratization of society

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<sup>163</sup> Bronner, *Rosa Luxemburg: A Revolutionary for Our Times*, 11.

as a whole becomes the goal of socialism.”<sup>164</sup> Yet as the limitations of Luxemburg’s position in “The Russian Revolution” show, the route to such a possible future, and the distinction between existing liberal democracy and the further democratization of the social and economic realms, may not necessarily lie in revolution.

Arendt’s category of Action does not require such patient, organizational work. It focuses on the spontaneous possibilities of human beginnings. This is not to say that Arendt believed that spontaneous uprisings emerged at random. It would be a misreading to dismiss her analysis of the conditions that made these uprising possible: for example, Arendt’s careful description of the political situation in the Eastern Bloc that followed de-Stalinization and led to the Hungarian Revolution.<sup>165</sup> Yet the council republicanism that emerges from the ontological concepts of *The Human Condition* presents a direct democratic politics that is juxtaposed to the Social and economic concerns which, rather than being the source of political action, are threats to public, political life. While Arendt’s analysis in *Origins* provides one model for analyzing the dangers to public and political life in the contemporary period, her prescription, an idealized republicanism, precludes the possibility of politically addressing economic issues. Spontaneous movements such as Occupy Wall Street, stemming from economic issues, are difficult to place into an Arendtian context without extruding the economic concerns in a similar way to Arendt’s separation of the political from the economic worker’s councils in the Hungarian Revolution.

Arendt’s republicanism, with its focus on heroic actions, the pursuit of liberation, and the enshrining of freedom in direct democracy, stands in stark contrast to the long tradition of socialist organizing that led to the creation of what Kolakowski calls “The Golden Age of

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<sup>164</sup> Bronner, 11.

<sup>165</sup> Arendt, “The Hungarian Revolution and Totalitarian Imperialism,” 110–24.

Socialism” in the Second International.<sup>166</sup> Arendt argues that the way to give democratic politics the substance of freedom is to capture the revolutionary spirit: the spark of Natality that sends a revolutionary in search of freedom and nothing else. In contrast, Luxemburg’s position incorporates questions of economic democracy as a necessary component of expanding freedom. The irreconcilability of Luxemburg’s socialist democracy and Arendt’s council republicanism is precisely the difference between the extension of democracy into the economic sphere, and Arendt’s refusal to combine the Political and the Social. Arendt’s insistence on the separation of these two spheres not only collapses her portrait of Luxemburg, but manages to overlook this aspect of Luxemburg’s theory of democracy entirely. Rather than seeing the Social as the threat of modernity to politics, Luxemburg’s theory is an attempt to expand democracy to those aspects of modern life that Arendt would later reject. Instead of seeing *animal laborans* as potential citizens needing to be elevated into a “higher” form of democracy, as Vollrath argues, Luxemburg’s socialist democracy aims to bring democracy into those economic and social spaces created by modernity and to open its emancipatory possibilities. While Arendt’s notion of republicanism is designed to counter the threats of modernity, typified into her concept of the Social, Luxemburg’s socialist democracy seeks to expand the liberatory potential of modernity by extending it into the socio-economic realm.

Does this mean that Arendt’s political philosophy is not relevant to our era at all? As Benhabib models, by displacing the centrality of *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s political thought can be interpreted away from the rigidity of its ontological language. Yet in doing so, Arendt’s commitment to revolution as the source of freedom, and her associated portrait of

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<sup>166</sup> Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 2: 355; Bronner, “Rosa Redux: A Reply to David Camfield and Alan Johnson,” 51.

Luxemburg, must be jettisoned. Similarly, the limitations of Luxemburg's revolutionary theory also point to the complexity of any question on the rethinking of democratic theory to incorporate those social and economic questions that Arendt refused to incorporate into her sphere of the Political. The insights gained from this analysis of Arendt, one that focuses on the possibilities of inclusive public spheres and the development and maintenance of an inclusive public discourse, can be very fruitful. Rather than seeing socialist politics along the lines of a division between (political) Action and the Social, the creation of a new socialist movement can be viewed as the renewed interest in expanding the public sphere to incorporate economic and social questions.

## Conclusion

Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg was inspired by her observation of the Hungarian Revolution and their shared interest in spontaneity. What each thinker meant by spontaneity, however, was radically different. It is not simply a matter of pointing to where Arendt was mistaken. To do so would be a disservice to the construction of a portrait that is rich with both personal and political affinities, even though the overall analysis is flawed. Arendt did not simply misunderstand Luxemburg's Marxism, but rather articulated Luxemburg through a lens with which she sought to redeem her from a contested legacy—one in which she was defined more by her enemies than her friends. Arendt sought to draw a distinction between Luxemburg and the socialist party which betrayed her, and the communist party which sought to distance itself from her legacy. Yet as a result, Arendt tears Luxemburg from her historical context and from the theoretical debates within socialist politics that gave her political thought meaning. Arendt's portrait of Luxemburg reflects her own revolutionary theories based on the philosophical concepts developed in *The Human Condition*. Arendt's separation of social and political spheres closes the possibility of the expansion of democracy into the economic realm. As such, it is difficult to reconcile Arendt's theory of revolution with a leftist such as Luxemburg.

While Luxemburg combined her Marxist theoretical analysis with a dialectical method of spontaneity and organization, Arendt's ontological politics was based on an understanding of the threat that the Social held for politics. Arendt articulated her portrait of Luxemburg through this lens and thus extruded the Marxist aspects of Luxemburg's thought. As a result, their two revolutionary visions are difficult to reconcile. However, there is a fruitful avenue of analysis available in a comparison of their mutual subtextual engagements with their positions as outsiders among their political worlds. Feminist reinterpretations of both thinkers are especially

interesting considering their ambivalent relationship to the women's movements of their time and commitments to universalist politics—as Rose notes, the relationship between “un-belonging” and their wider political thought and engagements remains a promising area for engaging with both thinkers.

Arendt's ontological politics, particularly her theory of council republicanism, are difficult to reconcile to the modern world. Luxemburg's revolutionary theory, similarly, is less immediately applicable to a contemporary world in which rebuilding a socialist movement is necessary before any discussion of reform or revolution could take place. Similarly, the limitations of her own revolutionary theory point to the problems in placing revolution at the center of democratic political theory. The limitations of Arendt's portrait to reinterpret Luxemburg outside of a socialist context point to the difficulty of reconciling these two positions. Yet in spite of this, Luxemburg's thought opens the possibility explicitly closed by Arendt: that of democratizing the economic sphere which is divorced from political democracy in capitalism.

Finally, as democracy appears again to be under a new threat of “dark times,” what can be gleaned from this encounter between Arendt and Luxemburg? The threats from far-right populism to liberal democracy, and the destabilizing effects of economic and environmental catastrophe point to questions that both thinkers asked: from where does liberal democracy draw its strength? For both thinkers, revolution provided an answer. Yet what remains when the centrality of revolution is removed? Both Arendt and Luxemburg's commitment to democratic institutions as the channel through which public freedom can be explored and flourish can remain a useful position in our current era. The relationship between direct democracy, whether

in the wards, worker's councils or other forms, to representative democracy perhaps opens one door to rethinking the question.

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