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The disappointment of Rosa Luxemburg: Rethinking revolutionary commitment in the face of failure

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Abstract

Despite the recent revival of revolutionary commitment in response to left melancholia, I suggest that the contemporary academic left has not adequately addressed the difficulty of responding to failure as an inevitable aspect of revolutionary politics. The dominant tendency has been to try to offset the risk of failure by managing revolutionary action in line with a pre-given model of revolutionary change – only to limit the range of possibilities for revolutionary engagement. To address this problem, I draw on Rosa Luxemburg, a foremost revolutionary thinker, whose experiences of disappointment led her to rethink the notion of revolutionary commitment as a practice of learning from failure. This rethinking of commitment suggests a different way of engaging with failure – one that expands our imagination of political possibilities beyond the confines of the dominant contemporary responses to left melancholia and enriches their visions of revolutionary change.

Keywords

disappointment, failure, left melancholia, revolutionary commitment, Rosa Luxemburg

Introduction

In the recent decade, several prominent leftist thinkers have sought to revive revolutionary commitment in response to left melancholia – the lingering sense of disenchantment in the wake of the failed twentieth-century projects of revolutionary societal transformation.

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Yet, despite this revival of a commitment to radical change, I suggest that the contemporary academic left has not adequately addressed the difficulty of productively responding to failure and disappointment as inevitable aspects of revolutionary politics.

To explore where the existing engagements with revolutionary failure remain wanting, I engage with two main responses to the problem of left melancholia on the contemporary left: new communism, with a focus on Jodi Dean as its perhaps most prominent representative, and reformist socialism, associated with Eric Olin Wright's project of real utopia. On the one hand, Wright has approached the failure of past revolutionary ideals as an opportunity to revise the stale frames of revolutionary thought and revive a commitment to radical change through a reformist politics attentive to the unintended consequences of political action.[1] On the other hand, Jodi Dean has bemoaned the perceived lack of radicality in such contributions and insisted that a commitment to radical change can only be revived through a return to the past, Leninist model of militant revolutionary struggle.[2] Both visions of reviving commitment, however, have tried to offset the risk of failure by managing revolutionary action in line with a pre-given model of revolutionary change – only to constrict the range of possibilities for revolutionary engagement. While the first response can limit our endeavours to what is deemed possible within the existing system, the other leads to an uncritical embrace of the old hierarchical model of revolutionary change as the *only* viable form of radical politics.[3]

This paper suggests a different way of engaging with failure – one that expands our imagination of political possibilities beyond the binary between a reformist politics of real utopia and a new communist insistence on the old model of revolutionary change.[4] I make this argument by drawing on the political thought and practice of Rosa Luxemburg, a foremost revolutionary thinker whose experiences of disappointment led her to rethink revolutionary commitment in the face of failure.

I focus on her disappointment over the failures of the socialist movement before and during WWI, specifically the movement's reliance on the criterion of success and the refusal to run the risk of failure. Calculations of usefulness, in Luxemburg's view, characterised both the reformist strand of the movement and the revolutionary politics of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. To ward off the risk of failure, the reformists pursued gradual reform, while sacrificing the possibilities for a revolutionary transformation of society. The Bolsheviks, in turn, sought to ensure the success of the revolution by grounding revolutionary commitment in a set of prescriptions enacted by the party leadership, while betraying the democratic character of revolutionary politics. In contrast to both these positions, Luxemburg's disappointment led her to rethink the notion of revolutionary commitment as a practice of learning from failure. This rethinking is not just an argument for bearing disappointment and persisting in the struggle for socialism despite failure but entails a profound reconsideration of commitment beyond the instrumental logic of success. On this account, reviving revolutionary commitment entails increasing the potential of learning from failure which is ultimately grounded in and sustained by experiences of solidarity with others and action-in-concert, rather than the satisfaction of pre-given goals.[5]

Rather than trying to ward off the risk of failure, this rethinking of revolutionary commitment reimagines failure as a productive site of possibility that can inspire future

projects of radical transformation without reliance on a pre-determined vision of change. Thus, it can help us avoid the problematic tendencies at work in the two dominant contemporary responses to left melancholia and enrich their visions of revolutionary change. Here I should emphasise that I am specifically not trying to 'correct' the contemporary efforts to respond to left melancholia by suggesting they should adopt the specific tactics or goals that Luxemburg adopted in her struggles. Rather, I explore how Luxemburg's rethinking of commitment as a practice of learning from failure could enrich their articulations of revolutionary possibility. On the one hand, I argue, it can expand the limits of possibility beyond the reformist managing of what is viable or achievable and develop the radical potential of Wright's 'real utopian' efforts to erode capitalism. On the other hand, it can supplement Dean's efforts to revive revolutionary commitment, approaching on-the-ground practices of democratic collective action and learning from failure not as a hindrance to but an essential condition of radical change.

My attempt to explore the contemporary relevance of Luxemburg's disappointment must address the question of how her context-bound insights into the dilemmas of Marxist revolutionary politics in the early 20th century can speak to the rather different context (and problems) facing progressive politics today. To address this question, I will not bracket the importance of situated context, trying to find in Luxemburg's work perennial lessons that could be unproblematically applied onto the dilemmas of today's world. Nor will I limit the relevance of Luxemburg's insights to her own context alone. Instead, I will follow a middle course between these two positions, adopting a two-step, critical-hermeneutical approach, recently adopted by Paulina Tambakaki in her engagement with Luxemburg's thought.[6] First, I will distinguish in Luxemburg's theoretical and practical engagements key moments of disappointment, uncover how they critically intervened in the struggles of her day and unearth how they led her to rethink revolutionary commitment. Second, I will trace how this rethinking of commitment – rather than any specific goals or tactics she adopted in her struggles – speaks to the recent debates about reviving revolutionary commitment in response to left melancholia.

Before proceeding with the argument, two caveats are necessary. First, my claims about the political value of Luxemburg's disappointment should not be taken to imply that the effects of disappointment are deterministic. As Deborah Gould notes, the outcomes of negative affective states are 'contingent rather than necessary or inevitable', dependent on how activists contend with them.[7] My argument therefore refers to a potential political significance of disappointment. I draw on the concrete example of Luxemburg's grappling with her disappointment to outline how experiences of disappointment *could* reanimate revolutionary commitment in contemporary times. Second, Luxemburg has often been interpreted as a proponent of historical determinism, viewing the socialist revolution as an inevitable outcome following the ultimate demise of capitalism. In my interpretation, in contrast, I follow the recent literature that has emphasised Luxemburg's attentiveness to the complexity, uncertainty and fallibility of revolutionary action that cannot rely on a predetermined end of history.[8]

The argument proceeds as follows. The first section outlines the reformist and new communist responses to left melancholia and points to their limitations. The second section explores the transformative potentials inhering in Luxemburg's disappointment,

focussing on how it led her to rethink revolutionary commitment in the face of failure. The third section shows how Luxemburg's rethinking of commitment can enrich the visions of revolutionary change found in the two dominant contemporary responses to left melancholia.

The affective landscape of progressive politics

In 1999, Wendy Brown used the phrase left melancholia to denote a 'crisis' of progressive politics that has not been able to come to terms with the failure of past utopian aspirations.[9] On her account, the sense of melancholia associated with a particular historical loss congealed into a 'backward-looking attachment' to past ideals that has hindered an adequate grasp of, and response to, the challenges of the present moment. The challenge facing progressive politics, for Brown, is to 'resist left melancholia', and rethink revolutionary commitment and transformative political action in the absence of utopian visions that have sustained us in the past. Since Brown's intervention, numerous voices in critical theory have associated left melancholia with 'a general eclipse of utopias',[10] a perceived 'narrowing of possibilities for egalitarian, radical democratic alternatives to existing structures of inequality and domination'.[11]

New political and theoretical developments in the recent decade, however, suggest that the affective character of progressive politics may be changing. The mobilisation of political resistance around the world – from the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring to the Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion protests – testifies to a resurgence of commitment to alternative ways of being. Several prominent leftist thinkers, too, have sought to revive a vision of revolutionary politics capable of responding meaningfully to contemporary challenges and articulating emancipatory alternatives to the existing system.

Yet, despite this revival of alternatives to the status quo, I suggest that the contemporary academic left has not adequately addressed the difficulty of productively responding to failure and disappointment as inevitable aspects of revolutionary politics. What I wish to address, then, is not so much a particular moment in the history of the Western revolutionary tradition that came to be knows as left melancholia, but a more pervasive, still-ongoing condition of progressive politics that needs to find a way of dealing with past – and present – failures without recourse to ready-made utopian ideals. This is especially important today when the sense of frustration and disappointment seems to derive not so much from a lack of commitment to alternative ways of being but from the difficulty of conceiving a viable path towards their realisation given the all-encompassing tendencies of the existing system, and its tendency to co-opt new initiatives and resistances.[12]

To explore where the existing engagements with failure remain wanting, I engage with two main responses to the problem of left melancholia on the contemporary left, Eric Olin Wright's reformist socialism and Jodi Dean's new communism. I have chosen these two theories because they are framed explicitly as an anti-dote to the problem of left melancholia and focus specifically on the articulations of *socialist* alternatives to the status quo. Certainly, other strands of critical theorising, such as theories of radical

democracy, have sought to rethink the forms of emancipatory politics in response to the end-of-century impasse. Yet these visions of democratic renewal have largely remained within the limits of liberal democracy.[13] Considering the significant challenges facing contemporary liberal democracies, it remains crucial to revive a commitment to radical change that goes beyond efforts to correct, augment, or expand the existing conception of democracy, and addresses issues of social and economic inequality in addition to an emphasis on openness, contestation, and plurality.[14] In this context, a renewed debate about how best to revive socialist alternatives to the status quo seems apt.

My characterisation of two main contemporary responses to left melancholia does not seek to offer an in-depth discussion of the differences within each position. The purpose is to outline how their engagement with the failure of past ideals shapes their proposals for how to revive revolutionary commitment in response to left melancholia and how these proposals constrict the scope of possibilities for change.

On the one hand, Wright's reformist socialism bases its project of 'transforming capitalism through real utopias' on the fact that the past revolutionary ideals are no longer credible.[15] While the need for an alternative to capitalism 'is as great as ever', Wright writes, the quest for socialist alternatives has been discredited through association with the twentieth-century failures of authoritarian statism.[16] In addition, given that the capitalist system of exploitation is deeply entrenched, attempts at a 'ruptural' overthrow are doomed to failure.[17] Consequently, socialism 'now seems more like archaic utopian dreaming, or perhaps even worse: a distraction from dealing with tractable problems in the real world'.[18] For Wright, then, left melancholia is to be traced to the failure of the old model of revolutionary change, which risks eroding the faith in alternatives to capitalism as such.[19]

Against this mood of resigned scepticism, Wright attempts to revive the sense that 'a fundamental alternative to capitalism is not simply *desirable*, but also *viable* and *achievable*'.[20] To that end, he proposes to revise the established frames of revolutionary thought and pursue a gradual transformation of capitalism 'in a *social*ist direction', by taking advantage of the possibilities inhering in the existing system.[21] Wright grants that elements of a ruptural strategy, such as confrontation between opposed social forces, might sometimes be necessary. However, the most viable and achievable emancipatory practice lies in 'the interplay of interstitial and symbiotic strategies'.[22] Interstitial strategies build alternatives within the 'niches and margins' of the capitalist society, without posing a significant threat to the ruling elite. Wright associates these strategies with some strands of anarchism. Symbiotic strategies, in turn, operate through the institutions of the state and civil society, and mainly serve a remedial function, improving the conditions of life within the existing system. These strategies are linked to the social democratic tradition.[23] Wright exemplifies the potential of his 'real utopian' strategic recommendations by pointing to already existing, 'radically different kinds of institutions and social relations' – such as worker-owned cooperatives, participatory city budgeting or citizen assemblies – which 'prefigure more comprehensive alternatives and move us in the direction of those alternatives'.[24]

Key to Wright's embrace of interstitial and symbiotic strategies over ruptural ones is his conviction that a viable vision of transformation must remain rooted in people's

democratic, collective action[25] and be attentive to the unintended consequences of revolutionary action.[26] This focus allows him to dissociate 'the socialist tradition from "state socialism"', and revive the promise of that tradition for the current disenchanted era.[27] Yet his appeal to real utopia rests on a reductive story of the twentieth-century revolutionary failure, which, in turn, precludes in advance the possibility of radical change, removing it to the realm of a distant, and likely unachievable, future.

Wright attributes the failure of past utopian ideals to the fact that they were unrealistic, 'unmoored' from the existing conditions.[28] He speculates that attempts at a revolutionary rupture in the existing system are inextricably linked to the dissolution of society into chaos, which compels revolutionary parties to 'resort to pervasive violence and repression to sustain social order'.[29] Such violence, in turn, 'destroys the possibility for a genuinely democratic, egalitarian process of building a new society'.[30] The historical evidence of twentieth-century revolutionary failures, Wright continues, certainly suggests that ruptural strategies do not work.[31] Since past examples of ruptures with capitalism have resulted in forms of 'authoritarian state-bureaucratic forms of economic organisation' rather than 'a democratic egalitarian alternative'. he concludes that attempts at radical transformation are not viable.[32]

His story of disappointment does not lead to a contextual engagement with specific historical circumstances of any given failure of socialism – such as the economic conditions at the time of the revolution, strategic mistakes or errors of leadership – and how we might be able to respond to it. Rather, it amounts to 'a finished historical lesson' in 'how not to conduct revolutionary politics',[33] where twentieth-century failures result from the impossibility of building sustainable alternatives to capitalism through radical ruptures per se.[34]

Certainly, one might argue that Wright's real utopia does not in fact limit the scope of change, but only proposes a different, gradualist transition to socialism. Yet, as several critics have noted, it is unlikely that Wright's strategic recommendations could challenge the existing relations of power and achieve his proposed (gradual) move in the socialist direction given the resilience of the capitalist system.[35] This is especially true when dealing with forms of domination, exploitation and exclusion experienced by racialised and sexualised populations in 'the colonial zone', who are perceived to be 'less-than-human' and lie outside of the 'the domain of metropolitan sociability'.[36] These forms of oppression, as de Sousa Santos argues, cannot be fought with the 'institutional tools of the modern state' which are predicated upon the presumption of 'the formal equality among human beings'.[37]

The problem, then, is not necessarily Wright's proposed vision of change, which contains quite radical elements, but that 'his strategic recommendations do not live up to this vision'.[38] As Wright himself acknowledges, interstitial strategies are always in danger of eventually degenerating in, being swallowed up or usurped by capitalist projects.[39] Further, attempts to protect and bolster interstitial strategies through symbiotic strategies may encounter 'structural "limits of possibility,"' which could be expanded only by challenging 'the "rules of the game" within which capitalism functions'.[40] The worry, in short, is that Wright's embrace of only 'viable' strategies to the exclusion of more radical challenges to capitalism also, albeit unwittingly, prefigures the scope of 'viable' change,

sacrificing radical possibilities for transformation in front of ‘the real world of compromise and concession’.[41]

On the other hand, several prominent figures on the academic left have argued that the only viable response to the disappointed and directionless left rests in a (re)turn to communism. For Jodi Dean, perhaps the most prominent representative of new communism,[42] left melancholia did not arise from the left’s unhealthy attachment to the past ideal of radical politics. Rather, its cause is to be traced to the left’s abandonment of that ideal, to ‘intellectual compromise, adaptation to the market, and the betrayal of the workers’ movement’ that characterises much of the contemporary left.[43] A left melancholic is someone who has accommodated to the capitalist vision of the world or abandoned their commitment to radical change in response to ‘the practical failures of Marxism-Leninism’.[44] Among the symptoms of this accommodation are not only reformist politics of the Wright type, but all forms of identity politics, issue politics and post-structuralism that have sublimated the authentic left radicalism oriented to the overthrow of the capitalist system of production.[45]

Accordingly, the proper response to the despair characterising contemporary left is not a revision of the established frames of revolutionary thought, but the resurrection of the past revolutionary model of militant anti-capitalism.[46] As Dean writes, with the resurgence of the communist horizon, ‘the field of possibilities for revolutionary theory and practice starts to change shape. Barriers to action fall away. New potential and challenges come to the fore. Anything is possible’.[47] The disappointment over the failure of past ideals here functions as a constitutive lack, ‘a gap, a question, a missingness’ that manifests itself as ‘the *non-coincidence* of communism with its setting’ and that functions as a force driving forward the communist ‘collective action, determination and will’.[48] This model includes a reimagined Leninist party organisation with an emphasis on the importance of discipline and a defence of hierarchical decision-making structures that could bring together the dispersed movements and articulate one common goal – the overthrow of capitalism.[49]

This reaffirmation of commitment to radical transformation is to be welcomed. However, the new communist narrative of the loss and return of a historically specific model of revolutionary struggle, too, lacks a sustained engagement with why the past revolutionary projects failed, and how we might be able to learn from their failure. This leads to an uncritical embrace of the old model of revolutionary change as the *only* viable form of radical politics, to the exclusion of other forms of revolutionary engagement.

On the one hand, Dean’s tracing of left melancholia to the left’s abandonment of the past ideal of radical politics brushes to the side the concrete historical failings of Leninism, specifically its authoritarian tendencies. The contemporary left needs to shed the fear of being ‘the bad guys’, stop feeling uncomfortable with ‘hierarchy, exclusion and dogmatism’, and recognise that ‘you can’t get to an egalitarian end from an inegalitarian place through egalitarian means’.[50] According to Dean, we should abandon our overly idealist search for a more democratic and egalitarian alternative to a hierarchical party organisation. The overthrow of capitalist ‘takes a fight, the defeat of some and the victory of the others’, and requires ‘a kind of state structure, a militant, invasive state structure—to reappropriate and redistribute wealth’.[51]

On the other hand, Dean's critique of the compromised and divided left leads her to insist on the need to adopt Lenin's approach to 'the actuality of revolution' and return to a one-directional struggle oriented to overthrowing capitalism.[52] This positing of communism as a privileged horizon of radical societal transformation is supposed to bring back authentic left politics and serve as a corrective to the contemporary left, which has eschewed 'any use of the term "we," emphasizing issue politics, identity politics and their own fragmentation into a multitude of singularities'.[53]

Dean's narrative of left melancholia thus risks dismissing the importance of struggles that do not conform to the prescribed authentic model of radical politics. For instance, forms of resistance that experiment with more democratic, horizontal models of political engagement are framed as deficient and potentially complicit with the existing capitalist order.[54] Further, Dean's framing disregards the radicality and significance of different struggles that centre gender, race, sexuality or disability as sites of intersectional oppressions and resistance – struggles that are 'discursively constituted as responsible for various ills afflicting the academic left'.[55]

My engagement with Luxemburg's disappointment does not aim to adjudicate between these two responses to the condition of left melancholia. Its purpose is to show that we do not need to accept the binary choice between the two positions, where past failures necessitate a reformist accommodation to the existing system or where a compromising stance of reform justifies a return to the old model of revolutionary struggle. Luxemburg's grappling with her experiences of disappointment suggests a different way of engaging with failure, which can revive a commitment to radical change without the assurances of utopian visions that have guided us in the past.

Luxemburg, disappointment and revolutionary commitment

This section unearths the transformative potentials inhering in Luxemburg's disappointment over the failures of the socialist movement before and during WWI. I show how Luxemburg's experiences of disappointment lead her to rethink revolutionary commitment as a practice of learning from failure and reimagine failure as a productive site of possibility for future revolutionary engagement.

Several critics have listed Luxemburg's embrace of failure as one of her lasting contributions to revolutionary theory and practice.[56] As Jacqueline Rose has noted, failure, for Luxemburg, 'was unavoidable. It had to be seen, not as an enemy, but as the fully-fledged partner of any viable politics'.[57] This does not mean that Luxemburg remained impervious to disappointment. To the contrary, she was often in despair, enraged and horrified, 'almost broken' by what she interpreted as major setbacks of revolutionary politics.[58] But she refused to give in to her disappointment, viewing it as necessary step on the path towards revolution and as an opportunity to rethink the established patterns of revolutionary commitment.

Unearthing the relevance of Luxemburg's disappointment may seem counterintuitive given that she has often been considered an example of 'the ruthless adherence to pure revolutionary principle'.[59] Her grappling with her disappointments, however, shows that there was nothing self-evident in her commitment; it was something to be constantly

fostered and revivified.[60] In the face of disappointment, Luxemburg often sought refuge in 'the deep, elemental, hidden wellsprings of history'[61] as 'the last place of hope'—a position that would seem to blatantly contrast her otherwise vocal insistence on 'the primacy of action'.[62] Yet Luxemburg's embrace of failure, as Michaelis convincingly argues, was not based on an eschatological faith in the necessary progress of history, which could help the revolutionaries maintain 'unwavering confidence' in the eventual triumph of socialism even in the face of flagrant defeat.[63] She never regarded the revolution as 'inevitable', but 'as within the realm of possibility', depending on 'the strength of the commitment that can be raised on its behalf'.[64] The challenge she outlines, then, is how to hold fast to one's commitment to the struggle for socialism in the face of failure and do so without reliance on pre-given goals of revolutionary action.

Facing up to this challenge, Luxemburg chided those of her comrades who gave in to their disappointment in response to defeat as refusing to run the risk of failure and therefore lacking true revolutionary commitment that precisely cannot depend on future success.[65] For what the fear of failure among revolutionaries revealed was that their revolutionary commitment was ultimately driven by calculations of usefulness, rather than their genuine adherence to a socialist transformation of society.[66] Luxemburg's rethinking of commitment as a practice of learning from failure, in contrast, entailed enhancing the potential for learning from past failures that Luxemburg claimed resided in experiences of collective action. It was this learning from failure, rather than any easy success, that she believed could equip the revolutionaries with the necessary experience, knowledge, and strength for the final victory.[67] Luxemburg's grappling with her disappointments illustrates what such a rethinking of commitment as a practice of learning from failure might look like in concrete circumstances of revolutionary action. On the one hand, her disappointment over the reformist politics within the workers' movement inspired her to refuse to reduce the meaning of an action to whether it achieves its goal and to resist the tendency towards compromise that often accompanies the perceived impossibility of radical change. On the other hand, her disappointment over the revolutionary politics of the Bolsheviks led her to insist that radical change can only come about through democratic collective action – and the practices of learning from failure it enables – rather than blind adherence to the ready-made prescriptions of the select few.

Reformism in the workers' movement

Luxemburg's first major disappointment concerned the reformist politics associated with Eduard Bernstein and the mainstream part of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD – *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*). Reformism in the workers' movement received a theoretical justification with Bernstein's publication of Evolutionary Socialism in 1899. However, Luxemburg grappled with the reformist tendencies throughout the following years, which exposed 'the deeper dispositions to compromise' within the party.[68] In her letter to Clara Zetkin from 20 March 1907, for instance, she writes that she feels 'the pettiness and indecisiveness which reigns in our party more brutally and more painfully than ever before'.[69] The fallacy of reformism has culminated in the SPD's refusal to oppose WWI – a moment that brought Luxemburg close to attempting suicide.[70]

She voiced her profound disappointment, despair, and shame in several letters she wrote in months following the fateful decision. She writes of the 'mood of despair', of the feeling of 'wanting to tear one's hair out', and of the 'pain' as 'former "friends" commit ever new villainies and vile actions'.[71]

Luxemburg's disappointment over Bernstein's reformist politics led her to challenge his 'fear' of failure, which she believed resulted in a misguided distinction between short-term and long-term goals.[72] Bernstein propounded a 'gradual approach' to socialism, arguing that socialism can be achieved step-by-step, through economic and political reform, rather than by means of an abrupt, and likely violent, revolutionary upheaval. Bernstein's argument for reform over revolution was based on his understanding of capitalist development not as a series of economic crises that would prepare the conditions for the proletarian revolution. Instead, he envisioned a gradual progress towards greater economic prosperity and the extension of political rights for the marginalised masses. Accordingly, the gradual means of reform offered a greater chance of success.[73]

From Luxemburg's perspective, Bernstein's fear of failure thus led him to limit the workers' endeavours to what was deemed possible in light of a realist assessment of the given situation, while postponing the goal of building socialism until an undefined time in the distant future.[74] In her view, Bernstein's concern that the workers' revolutionary aspirations might be 'premature' rested on a misunderstanding of the revolutionary process, and specifically the mistaken view that the socialist transformation of society 'can be realised in one act, by a victorious blow of the proletariat'.[75] Rather, Luxemburg insisted, what is needed is 'a long and stubborn struggle', which includes the acceptance of complexity, unpredictability and failure.[76] This also means that, from the perspective of the final victory, any earlier attempt that did not succeed could be considered to have occurred 'too early'.[77]

But for Luxemburg it would be a mistake to view failure as a sign that the revolutionary aspirations are premature or overly idealistic. Her rethinking of revolutionary commitment was based on the recognition that it is the very experience of failure that allows the working class to 'acquire the degree of political maturity' and create 'the *political* conditions of the final victory'.[78] On this account, even a revolutionary action that does not have an immediate prospect of success – and that is in this sense 'premature'—can 'provoke and determine the *point* of the final victory' and thus prefigures the contours of the future socialist society.[79] This is because it is through such actions that the working class develops collective consciousness and attains the experience of solidarity.[80]

Similarly, Luxemburg's disappointment with the SPD's refusal to oppose WWI led her to expose the fallacy of opportunism and reveal the political potential of a different way of engaging with failure. To be sure, Luxemburg recognised the risk that the party's opposition to the war would cost it support among the working classes caught in the confusion of the times.[81] Yet here again she appeals to the revolutionaries' capacity to 'go into the fight, wherever necessity demands it, without previous assurance of success'.[82] The opposition to the war would have been worth it, she emphasises, even if it accomplished 'nothing but to save the honour of the proletariat' and ensure that workers 'would not have died in spiritual confusion'.[83] But, as the time went on, its principled opposition to the war would have earned the party 'unparalleled moral prestige', the status

of 'a rock in a stormy sea', and 'the lighthouse keeper of socialism and of human emancipation'.[84] In Luxemburg's view, then, a different attitude towards failure would have allowed the workers' movement to resist compromising with imperialism and its attempt to plunge the whole of humanity into 'the abyss of shame and misery'.[85] Moreover, her rethinking of revolutionary commitment considered that even this most terrible betrayal of socialist principles 'will not have been in vain' if the workers are willing to learn from it.[86] The fallacy of forfeiting the capacities for critical judgement in front of the rule of necessity, she argued, should make it clear that socialism will not 'fall as manna from heaven', but will emerge only as a result of 'a long chain of powerful struggles' in the course of which the proletariat will assume responsibility for itself and its history.[87]

What grounds Luxemburg's conception of commitment and guards it against a compromising stance of reform, then, is not confidence in future success. To the contrary, her grappling with disappointment leads her to refuse to reduce the meaning of political action to whether it achieves its predetermined goal and to resist the troubling tendency to preclude in advance the possibility of radical change. This rethinking of revolutionary commitment beyond the criterion of success has recently been beautifully encapsulated by Druscilla Cornell: 'We cannot know defeat in advance. We cannot know the possibilities any particular struggle will yield. We do not struggle only because we think we can win or even that we can hope to win. We struggle because we want to live more human lives by investing in and with others to build a new world'.[88]

Further, in the face of disappointment, Luxemburg reconceptualised experiences of defeat through the notion of what Lewis Gordon calls 'constructive failure'.[89] Here, revolutionary commitment is based on evaluating events not in terms of 'whether "I" succeed', but in terms of how any particular uprising or revolution fits into '"our" unending story across time'.[90] As Jane Anna Gordon and Druscilla Cornell write, Luxemburg's practice of learning from failure enables us to contextualise 'individual instances of failure in the much larger horizon of collective transformation', where steps forward are always 'enabled by previous defeats'.[91] Thus, her commitment in the face of failure is kindled by an awareness that even an uprising that failed to bring about any immediate result can effect a change in what is deemed possible and prepare the 'conditions for something new to emerge' in the future.[92]

Revolutionary politics of Lenin and the Bolsheviks

The same insistence on rethinking commitment beyond the criterion of success arises from Luxemburg's disappointment over the revolutionary politics of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. While Luxemburg was generally sympathetic to Lenin's revolutionary project, praising the Bolsheviks for their 'political farsightedness and firmness of principle',[93] she nevertheless thought that the means they employed ultimately betrayed the cause of socialism.[94] She expressed her disappointment in her 1904 essay on *Organisational Questions of Russian Social Democracy,* her 1911 manuscript *Credo: On the State of Russian Social Democracy*, and her famous 1918 manuscript *The Russian Revolution*, as well as in several letters to her colleagues. She bemoaned 'the sterile spirit

of the night-watchman state'[95] that tries to 'resolve problems … with fists and knives',[96] while eliminating the creative spirit of revolution, breeding corruption and discrediting true socialism.[97]

What Luxemburg found disappointing in the revolutionary politics of the Bolsheviks was that they tried to ensure the success of the revolution by abolishing democratic freedoms and silencing opposing voices. Thus, they have perverted the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat to mean the rule of 'a little leading minority' in the name of the proletariat, rather than the rule of 'the mass of the people'.[98] The true dictatorship of the proletariat, for Luxemburg, would include the rule of not only the proletariat, but 'all the progressive interests in society' and 'all the oppressed victims of the bourgeois social order'.[99] This fallacy, according to Luxemburg, stemmed from the Bolsheviks' 'tacit assumption' that 'the socialist transformation is something for which a ready-made formula lies completed in the pocket of the revolutionary party, which needs only to be carried out energetically in practice'.[100] Grounding 'proper' revolutionary commitment in adherence to 'a sum of ready-made prescriptions which have only to be applied', Luxemburg argues, Lenin sought to eliminate the possibility of failure.[101] Yet he has thereby also swept from under the proletariat's feet the mainspring of radical change, which cannot be prescribed by a 'party program or textbook', but can only come about through collective action and self-rule of the people – including the experience of error and failure that it necessarily entails.[102]

Luxemburg's disappointment over Leninist politics led her to approach experiences of failure not as a threat to the success of the revolution, but an opportunity to confront and creatively respond to the difficulties of revolutionary action. As Luxemburg emphasises, 'the mistakes that are made by a truly revolutionary workers' movement are, historically speaking, immeasurably more fruitful and more valuable than the infallibility of the best possible "Central Committee."'[103] Behind this observation is Luxemburg's recognition that 'socialism by its very nature cannot be decreed'[104] since it is impossible to know what socialism is in advance.[105] Only 'the negative, the tearing down, can be decreed; the building up, the positive cannot'.[106] We are all embedded in and conditioned by exploitative relationships and that we cannot simply step outside and imagine a sure way out.[107] Dictatorial rule, by decree and terror, will not be able to effect the required 'spiritual transformation in the masses degraded by centuries of bourgeois class rule' and inspire 'social instincts in place of egotistical ones'.[108] The remedy to the difficulties of revolution, in this case 'the elimination of democracy', she succinctly argues, 'is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure'.[109] Revolutionary commitment dies if it is reduced to applauding the speeches and directives of a few self-proclaimed leaders and unanimously adopting the already prepared resolutions. This ensues in 'a brutalisation of public life', including corruption and the elimination of political opponents.[110]

Luxemburg's rethinking of revolutionary commitment, in contrast, started from the realisation that the practical reality of socialism relies on broadening the 'freedom to make mistakes' as the essential condition of revolutionary action.[111] As she elaborates: 'Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party—however numerous they may be—is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively

freedom for the one who thinks differently'.[112] Democratising revolutionary action certainly entailed a risk of failure and Luxemburg accepted that risk wholeheartedly. This is because, within her notion of revolutionary commitment, the freedom to make mistakes and learn from failure was the essential condition of creativity, adaptability, and of bringing into being new, non-exploitative relations between people.[113] On the one hand, 'the active, untrammelled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people' enables 'public control', correcting in the course of public participation 'the innate shortcomings of social institutions'.[114] On the other hand, it is only through 'a free struggle of opinion' and 'the exchange of experiences' between a plurality of equals that 'something other and new can emerge'.[115]

Luxemburg's disappointment over the centralist tendencies of the Bolsheviks, then, shows that a commitment to radical transformation cannot arise from adherence to a set of prescribed rules enacted by the party leadership. To the contrary, her rethinking of commitments as a practice of learning from failure teaches us that radical change can only be achieved through a democratisation of the 'freedom to make mistakes' as the essential condition of creativity. Thus, Luxemburg helps us not only avoid the traps of compromise, but also preclude a development into authoritarianism that ultimately betrays the democratic – and fallible – character of revolutionary politics.

Learning from failure with Luxemburg

In the previous section, I articulated how Luxemburg's disappointment led her to rethink revolutionary commitment in the face of failure. In this section, I show how this rethinking of commitment can help us avoid the problematic tendencies at work in the two dominant contemporary responses to left melancholia and enrich their visions of radical change.

Beyond compromise

We have seen how Wright's project of real utopia rests on a reductive story of past revolutionary failure, which leads him to constrict the range of viable revolutionary possibilities and destine more radical challenges to capitalism for failure. This tendency is evident in his recent response to the limits of reformist strategies in light of the contemporary crisis of democracy, which has become incapable of dealing with stark inequality produced by twenty-first-century capitalism.[116] Wright recognises that globalisation and the financialization of capital in the 21st century have significantly constrained the powers of the (social democratic) state to keep the worst effects of capitalism in check.[117] Nevertheless, his conclusion about the range of viable strategies remains unchanged. What we need to do to keep interstitial strategies from being swallowed up by capitalism is to combine them with the mechanisms of social democracy.[118]

Wright emphasises that it is essential to contest, not the actual limits of possibility, but our 'belief in the limits of possibility', specifically the claim that the constraints globalisation imposes upon states are so powerful that states can no longer effectively regulate

capitalism.[119] However, his faith in the emancipatory powers of democracy neglects unequal material, socio-economic conditions of participation, and seems unable to account for right-wing and business opposition to – and their willingness to fight tooth and nail – any, however evolutionary, path to socialism.[120] Wright grants that his proposed strategy is not fool-proof and that it may well be true that a decisive rupture is needed to go beyond capitalism. But in that case – as he infers from his line of argument about the necessary failure of ruptural strategies – socialism 'will be permanently unachievable'.[121]

Luxemburg's disappointment, in contrast, leads her to refuse to view failure as a phenomenon that defines the boundary between the 'realistic' and 'unrealistic', consigning those projects that failed to the realm of the impossible and the unrealisable.[122] Her rethinking of revolutionary commitment as a practice of learning from failure moves us beyond a reformist managing of what is viable or achievable and helps develop the radical potential of Wright's project of real utopia in two ways.

First, Luxemburg's refusal to reduce the meaning of an action to whether it achieves its goal resists the troubling tendency to preclude in advance the possibility of radical change and remains on the lookout for opportunities to expand the limits of possibility. As Luxemburg insisted, even an action that may not have an immediate prospect of success may ultimately provoke a socialist transformation of society. This reorientation does not entail a rejection of reformist strategies per se, but a refusal to let them predetermine the scope of 'achievable' transformation. It allows us to seize the possibilities for action in the present and let them unfold into the future, rather than proclaiming them unrealisable in advance.

Expanding the limits of possibility need not entail a violent overthrow of capitalism – the scenario Wright associates with ruptural strategies. Rather, it may mean imbuing interstitial and symbiotic strategies with 'an oppositional spirit' that would continuously remind resisters of their 'ultimate goal' – the building of a socialist society – and prevent their projects from turning into capitalist ventures.[123] In this case, the aim of ruptural transformation would only play 'a secondary role' in the overall revolutionary organisation but would nevertheless provide direction for the other activities.[124] Expanding the limits of possibility could also be achieved through what Cihan Tugal calls an 'intermittent revolution', where resisters would adopt varied strategies in response to concrete circumstances of oppositional action. For instance, periods of constructing different ways of being and relating to one another through interstitial strategies could be backed by 'massive mobilisation' if necessary, such as in the case of a backlash.[125]

Echoing this proposition, de Sousa Santos relates how social and political struggles in Ecuador combined institutional mobilisations striving for legal reform with extra-institutional, more confrontational strategies, such as public protests, road blockages and boycotts. This combination resulted in radical constitutional changes – including granting rights to nature and instituting an economic-social model based on a harmonious rather than exploitative relationship with nature – which entailed a radical 'refoundation' of the modern state.[126] Such experimentation with the possibilities of political action beyond the criterion of success could amplify the transformative potential of Wright's proposals for sustainable emancipatory alternatives to capitalism. For interstitial strategies would then not remain limited to constructing oases of anti-capitalism within the existing capitalist

system but prefigure a broader transformation of society towards a radical economic democracy.

Certainly, such efforts to expand the limits of possibility may fail, and this brings me to the second insight that I wanted to draw out: Luxemburg's reconceptualisation of experiences of defeat through the notion of constructive failure. The notion of constructive failure captures how failed uprisings can inspire future struggles, as their unfulfilled hopes feed into a continued commitment to fighting for a better future 'even in the face of circumstances that do not guarantee having one'.[127] From Wright's perspective, the failure of the 2011 Egyptian revolution testifies to the 'unrealistic' expectations of the protesters, who thought that an overthrow of an oppressive regime would lead to a future of freedom and social justice. Indeed, it can hardly be denied that the situation in Egypt today could not be more ominous, as the military repression is set on eliminating any remaining possibilities for dissent. There is also no guarantee that the democratic practices that sustained the Arab Spring will be taken up again in the future. Yet, as Luxemburg's reconceptualisation of failure allows us to appreciate, the uprisings have changed 'the conditions of possibility for future activity'.[128] As Ahdaf Soueif writes in her memoir of the Egyptian Revolution, the change in the people is irreversible: while it was 'not possible to say what will happen next, […] I know this won't stop. No one, nobody, not one of us, is going to step back into the nightmare'.[129] Importantly, the change in conditions of possibility is not limited to a change in the resisters' mental disposition towards reality, but encompasses a shift in embodied, habitual ways of being in the world that shape political action in the future.

Further, in line with Luxemburg's grappling with her disappointments, Soueif's narrative of the uprisings soberly recounts both the successes and the failures of the revolution in order to help future generations learn from past struggles.[130] Rather than proclaiming that the projects that failed must be unrealistic, her learning from failure means examining the politico-historical constellation of power that conditioned past losses and reflecting upon the possibilities of political action in their aftermath.[131] This includes a reckoning with how the oppressive conditions have constrained the actions of the revolutionaries as well as how resistance politics might be able to reframe those conditions towards greater equality, for instance, by forging relations of solidarity across the deep divisions within society.[132] This engagement with a concrete instance of revolution nicely demonstrates how a disappointed learning from failure can resist the reformist tendency to predetermine the scope of viable transformation and sustain a commitment to radical change in the face of unfavourable circumstances. In the case of the Arab Spring, then, the challenge would consist less in discouraging future ruptures with the violent regime and more in trying to steer them towards the protesters' initial goals of freedom, social justice, and human dignity.

Democratising 'freedom to make mistakes'

A reductive engagement with past revolutionary failure also mars the new communist response to left melancholia. In Jodi Dean's case, the fear of failure leads to an insistence on the centralist, hierarchical mode of organisation that is to keep the protesters on 'the

"right" path in terms of their aims and tactics' and thus secure the success of the revolution.[133] The politically troubling nature of this move is evident in her assessment of recent instances of democratic mobilisation and resistance, specifically the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Dean begins by praising the emancipatory potential of the innovative tactics of occupation that allowed diverse groups to say 'we', to 'rupture' the sense of the inevitability of status quo and revive the 'fragmented, melancholic, depressive' left.[134] However, she considers their plural, diverse character, and their insistence of horizontal, non-hierarchical organisation as a cause of their ultimate failure. As she writes, the practices of autonomy and horizontality that galvanised people at the beginning 'came later to be faulted for conflicts and disillusionment within the movement'.[135] The ideal of autonomy encouraged people 'to pursue multiple, separate, and even conflicting goals rather than work toward common ones', while the insistence on horizontality induced a 'scepticism' and 'paranoia' toward organising structures and leaders.[136] The solution Dean proposes is for Occupy to develop into 'a new kind of communist party', thus tempering 'autonomy with solidarity', 'adding vertical and diagonal strength to the force of horizontality', and attuning itself 'to the facts of leadership'.[137]

Luxemburg's disappointment with Leninist politics helps us unravel the theoretical misunderstanding underpinning Dean's intervention: the view that the 'frustratingly'[138] fallible character of collective action is something to be offset, rather than confronted as an inevitable element of political engagement. Luxemburg's rethinking of revolutionary commitment resists this conclusion, approaching on-the-ground practices of democratic collective action and learning from failure not as a hindrance to but an essential condition of radical change. Thus, it can importantly supplement Dean's efforts to revive a commitment to radical transformation and enhance new communism's potential to achieve a radical break with the status quo in two ways.

First, Luxemburg's rethinking of revolutionary commitment as a practice of learning from failure allows us to see experiences of failure as occasions for the maturing of revolutionary commitment, including the adaptability and responsiveness to the situation at hand, resilience in the face of adversity, as well as further efforts to democratise revolutionary action. Dean relates how the activists' disenchantment with the Occupy movement emerged from the horizontal organisation and the failure to attune themselves to 'the facts of leadership'. Yet, as Markoff, Lazar and Smith note, the activists expressed their disappointment with the exclusionary practices within the Movement, including 'colonial, white supremacist and heteronormative dynamics' as well as 'an underlying current of classism and unequal power in decision-making processes'.[139] In many cases, this disappointment further energised their efforts to develop innovative 'democracy-enhancing' practices and procedures or channel their energies to new movements and projects that reflected participatory organisational models.[140]

The activists' disappointment here seems to echo Luxemburg's lesson to broaden the 'freedom to make mistakes' as 'the only way forward'.[141] This lesson should not be read as an argument for the pure 'spontaneity' of revolutionary action or against the party form as such. Rather, it contains an appeal to approach novel forms of revolutionary organisation – those

that do not conform to established models of revolutionary change – with a 'broadness and flexibility of thought' rather than 'a Lenin-style narrow-mindedness of theoretical views'.[142]

For Dean, people who are sceptical of the party as a mode of organisation are saying either that 'there's no alternative to capitalism" or that they have "given up'.[143] Luxemburg's emphasis on the need to broaden the freedom to make mistakes, in contrast, holds that it is important not 'to extinguish what cannot be controlled or fully known' – even in the face of likely failure.[144] Thus, the lesson that Luxemburg drew from the 'failure' of the 1905 Russian Revolution was not that 'the masses of people needed strong leaders to tell them what to do', but that 'the people needed to think through how they might seize power differently'.[145] From this perspective, Occupy Wall Street is not best approached from the position of 'a party manager' that would 'compute, calculate, or count costs and benefits in advance'.[146] Instead, Luxemburg's notion of revolutionary commitment allows us to appreciate the movement's practices of learning from failure. These practices yielded innovative models of revolutionary action – such as specialised groups or caucuses or spokescouncils – that inspired forms of organisation adopted by the Gezi Park protests in 2013 in Turkey[147] and by the Black Lives Matter movement in the US.[148]

Further, Luxemburg's insistence on the importance of learning from failure requires that parties develop decision-making procedures that allow for the broadest possible democratisation of revolutionary action.[149] Only in this way can the party maintain 'the closest possible contact with the mood of the masses', remain adaptable to the given situation and nurture creativity as an essential condition of radical transformation.[150] Indeed, Luxemburg's changed attitude towards failure holds that a revolutionary direction can only be kept if revolutionary commitment remains grounded in democratic political action and a freedom to make mistakes rather than simple adherence to a party line.[151] On this account, a commitment to radical change may require of us 'to *oppose* party discipline' or 'to *counter* ideological dogmatism'.[152]

Second, Luxemburg's rethinking of revolutionary commitment recognises that, in contrast to liberation *from*, 'liberation *for*' cannot be pre-defined, but is 'the rallying of creative resources of possibility'.[153] For Dean, the concern with what happens after liberation from capitalist oppression and the revolutionary takeover of power 'is not the thing to worry about' and only 'pushes us away from the task of building the political party or parties that we need to fight the struggle'.[154] What is primary is 'building capacity and will' necessary for the taking of state power.[155] Luxemburg's recognition of the radical potential inherent in democratic practices of learning from failure, in contrast, leads her to acknowledge that the challenge of liberation *for* cannot be deferred for after the revolution but is deeply bound up with the question of the revolutionary takeover of power. For – even though revolutionary action within an oppressive system will necessarily be antagonistic – it simultaneously points beyond the existing order,[156] anticipating 'the free praxis of an egalitarian society'.[157]

For this reason, democratic social forms or institutions that enable a continuous practice of experimentation and learning from failure – such as general elections, unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, or participation-based councils or assemblies – should be incorporated into the very process of revolutionary

transformation of society. Luxemburg's conception of radical commitment thus complements Dean's focus on transforming the revolutionary moment into political power[158] with a concern about the need for democratic and inclusive practices of public freedom 'to continue and deepen' during and after revolution.[159] For it is only the broadest democratisation of political action and the learning from failure it enables – rather than pre-given formulae and anti-democratic measures – that constitutes the essential condition of creativity, of bringing into being different, non-exploitative relations between people, and of lasting change.

Conclusion

The essay drew on the political potential of Luxemburg's disappointment to contribute to current debates within progressive politics about how to respond to the failure of past utopian ideals. I showed how Luxemburg's grappling with her experiences of disappointment led her to rethink the notion of revolutionary commitment as a practice of learning from failure. This rethinking of revolutionary commitment, I argued, resists the reductive engagement with the failure of past revolutionary ideals that colours the reformist socialist and new communist responses to left melancholia. The desire to avoid the risk of failure led Wright and Dean to seek refuge in pre-given models of revolutionary change, while constricting the range of possibilities for revolutionary engagement. Luxemburg's rethinking of revolutionary commitment, in contrast, reimagines failure as a productive site of possibility that can inspire future projects of radical transformation without reliance on a pre-determined vision of change.

Luxemburg's answer to the contemporary engagements with the failure of past utopian ideals, then, is not so much about resisting left melancholia or trying to neutralise it through a naïve turn to optimism. Rather, her experiences of disappointment encourage us to delve into the historicity and contingency of our affective attachments – to examine where they come from and consider them as an occasion for rethinking the established patterns of revolutionary thought. In other words, she inspires us to acknowledge, come to terms with and learn from the complexities, failures and losses entailed in resistance, rather than domesticating them into 'established histories and frames of reference'.[160]

This changed relationship to failure may not provide blueprints for how to conduct revolutionary politics. Yet it is also not limited to an abstract or purely formal embrace of contingency. Rather, it is oriented towards expanding our imagination of political possibilities beyond the confines of predominant revolutionary strategies and models and includes a set of substantive commitments and approaches to change. On the one hand, Luxemburg's rethinking of revolutionary commitment moves us beyond a reformist managing of the scope of achievable change and develops the radical potential of Wright's 'real utopian' efforts to erode capitalism. Her response to failure remains on the lookout for opportunities to expand the limits of possibility and recognises that even an action that may not have an immediate prospect of success can prepare the conditions for something new to emerge in the future. On the other hand, Luxemburg's rethinking of commitment as a practice of learning from failure dispels the conviction that radical transformation can only be achieved through a hierarchical organisational model oriented towards taking

state power. Thus, it importantly supplements Dean's efforts to revive revolutionary commitment, insisting that a radical break with the status quo and different, non-exploitative relations between people can only emerge through democratic practices of learning from failure.

Thinking revolutionary commitment as a practice of learning from failure can serve as an important resource for reviving dedication to radical change in the face of adverse circumstances today when the assurances of past utopian visions are sorely missing. This is because it recognises failure as an opportunity to creatively respond to the difficulties of revolutionary politics and expand the conditions of possibility for future engagement. Thus, it encourages an openness to the future that can help us embrace and strengthen the radical potential of on-the-ground struggles against oppression, without either proclaiming them to be unrealistic in advance or trying to manage them in line with established patterns of revolutionary thought.

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2. Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012).
3. Clive Gabay, 'Ever Failed. No Matter. Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better', *International Theory* 14(2) (2022): 285–310, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000652; Jonathan Dean, 'Radicalism Restored?', *Contemporary Political Theory* 14, no. 3 (1 August 2015): 234–55, https://doi.org/10.1057/cpt.2014.45.
4. With the pronoun 'us', I refer to proponents of emancipatory struggles for social and political transformation.
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8. Hannah Arendt, ‘Rosa Luxemburg, 1871-1919’, in *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1968), 33–56; Loralea Michaelis, ‘Rosa Luxemburg on Disappointment and the Politics of Commitment’, *European Journal of Political Theory* 10, no. 2 (1 April 2011): 206, https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885110395478; Sidonia Blättler and Irene M. Marti, ‘Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt’, *Hypatia* 20, no. 2 (1 May 2005): 88–101, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2005.tb00469.x; Jon Nixon, *Rosa Luxemburg and the Struggle for Democratic Renewal* (London: Pluto Press, 2018); Jane Anna Gordon and Druscilla Cornell, ‘I Have a Thousand More Things I Want to Say to You’, in *Creolising Rosa Luxemburg* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 1–25.
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15. Wright, ‘Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias’, 2.
16. Wright, 2.
17. Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso, 2010), 65.
18. Wright, ‘Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias’, 2.
19. Wright, 2.
20. Erik Olin Wright, ‘The Continuing Relevance of the Marxist Tradition for Transcending Capitalism’, *TripleC* 16, no. 2 (2018): 494.
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22. Wright, 21.
23. Wright, 20.
24. Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, 1; Wright, ‘Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias’, 21.
25. Wright, 19.
26. Wright, 3.
27. M. Fourcade et al., ‘On Erik Olin Wright, Envisioning Real Utopias, London and New York, NY, Verso, 2010’, *Socio-Economic Review* 10, no. 2 (1 April 2012): 376, https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwr032.

28. Gabay, ‘Ever Failed. No Matter. Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better’, 2–3.
29. Wright, ‘The Continuing Relevance of the Marxist Tradition for Transcending Capitalism’, 493.
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33. Gabay, ‘Ever Failed. No Matter. Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better’, 4, 8.
34. Wright, ‘The Continuing Relevance of the Marxist Tradition for Transcending Capitalism’, 493.
35. Fourcade et al., ‘On Erik Olin Wright, Envisioning Real Utopias, London and New York, NY, Verso, 2010’.
36. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ‘The Alternative to Utopia Is Myopia’, *Politics & Society* 48, no. 4 (2020): 573–74, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329220962644. I decided to retain references to de Sousa Santos’ critique of Wright’s project of ‘real utopia’, as he has engaged in an important intellectual exchange with Wright’s work. However, I want to highlight the seriousness of the recent accusations of sexual harassment brought against de Sousa Santos, which have led to his suspension from the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra.
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40. Wright, ‘The Continuing Relevance of the Marxist Tradition for Transcending Capitalism’, 498.
41. Mathias Thaler, ‘Hope Abjuring Hope’, *Political Theory* 46, no. 5 (1 October 2018): 690, https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591717740324.
42. Other prominent representatives of this strand of critical theorising include Alan Badiou and Slavoj Žižek.
43. Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, 160, 176.
44. Dean, 176.
45. Dean, 53.
46. Dean, 178.
47. Dean, 11.
48. Dean, 187, 190, 195.
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50. Janell Watson, ‘Repoliticizing the Left’, *The Minnesota Review* 81, no. 1 (2013): 83.
51. Paul Apostolidis, ‘Paul Apostolidis, William Connolly, Jodi Dean, and Jade Schiff Comment on Romand Coles’s Book Visionary Pragmatism’, *Democratic Theory* 4, no. 1 (1 June 2017): 95; Watson, ‘Repoliticizing the Left’, 83.
52. Apostolidis, ‘Paul Apostolidis, William Connolly, Jodi Dean, and Jade Schiff Comment on Romand Coles’s Book Visionary Pragmatism’, 95.
53. Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, 53.

54. Apostolidis, 'Paul Apostolidis, William Connolly, Jodi Dean, and Jade Schiff Comment on Romand Coles's Book Visionary Pragmatism', 92.
55. Dean, 'Radicalism Restored?', 245. In her more recent book, *Comrade,* Dean counts anti-racist, feminist, queer, and environmental struggles as part of the communist horizon. Yet she insists that the comrade represents 'a generic figure' characterised by 'sameness, equality and solidarity' and based on abstracting from 'socially given and naturalised identities' to affirm a 'shared commitment to a common struggle'. See Jodi Dean, *Comrade* (London: Verso, 2019), 78, 19. She attributes the concerns about the masculine, white imaginary operating behind the figure of the comrade to 'a fear about the loss of individual specificity'. See Dean, 54.
56. Arendt, 'Rosa Luxemburg, 1871-1919'; Jacqueline Rose, *Women in Dark Times* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015); Kimberly Hutchings, 'Revolutionary Thinking', in *Women's International Thought*, ed. Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 52–71; Gordon and Cornell, 'I Have a Thousand More Things I Want to Say to You'; Michaelis, 'Rosa Luxemburg on Disappointment and the Politics of Commitment'.
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60. Michaelis, 'Rosa Luxemburg on Disappointment and the Politics of Commitment', 206.
61. Luxemburg, The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg, 672–73.
62. Blättler and Marti, 'Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt', 97.
63. Michaelis, 'Rosa Luxemburg on Disappointment and the Politics of Commitment', 204.
64. Michaelis, 217.
65. Luxemburg, *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, 657–58; Michaelis, 'Rosa Luxemburg on Disappointment and the Politics of Commitment', 205–6.
66. Luxemburg, The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg, 658.
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71. Luxemburg, The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg, 617–18.
72. Luxemburg, 'Social Reform or Revolution', 157.
73. Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), xxviii.
74. Luxemburg, 'Social Reform or Revolution', 140–41, 155–56.
75. Luxemburg, 159.
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80. Luxemburg, 165.
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84. Luxemburg, 331.
85. Luxemburg, 321.
86. Luxemburg, 321.
87. Luxemburg, 321.
88. Gordon and Cornell, 'I Have a Thousand More Things I Want to Say to You', 23.
89. Lewis R. Gordon, *Freedom, Justice, and Decolonisation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 78.
90. Gordon, 78.
91. Gordon and Cornell, 'I Have a Thousand More Things I Want to Say to You', 22.
92. Gordon, Freedom, Justice and Decolonisation, 78.
93. Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution', in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 283.
94. Luxemburg, 'Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy', 264.
95. Luxemburg, 256.
96. Rosa Luxemburg, 'Credo: On the State of Russian Social Democracy', in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 272.
97. Luxemburg, 'Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy', 256; Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution', 306; Luxemburg, *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, 850.
98. Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution', 308.
99. Luxemburg, 'Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy', 262–63.
100. Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution', 305.
101. Luxemburg, 305.
102. Luxemburg, 305–6.
103. Luxemburg, 'Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy', 265.
104. Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution', 306.
105. Luxemburg, 305.
106. Luxemburg, 306.
107. Gordon and Cornell, 'I Have a Thousand More Things I Want to Say to You', 22.
108. Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution', 306.
109. Luxemburg, 302.
110. Luxemburg, 307.
111. Hutchings, 'Revolutionary Thinking', 64.
112. Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution', 305.
113. Luxemburg, 305.
114. Luxemburg, 306–7, 302.
115. Blättler and Marti, 'Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt', 91. To be sure, Luxemburg acknowledges that Lenin and the Bolsheviks have had to operate under 'devilishly hard conditions'. See Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution', 309. Accordingly, it would be

'demanding something superhuman' to expect from them that they 'should conjure forth the finest democracy' under such circumstances. See Luxemburg, 309. But the 'danger' for Luxemburg is that of making 'a virtue of necessity', prescribing the means 'forced upon them' by the difficult circumstances as 'a model of socialist tactics' as such. See Luxemburg, 309.
116. Wright, 'How To Be An Anti-Capitalist for the 21st Century', 10.
117. Wright, 12.
118. Wright, 17.
119. Wright, 13.
120. Fourcade et al., 'On Erik Olin Wright, Envisioning Real Utopias, London and New York, NY, Verso, 2010', 373–74, 383–84.
121. Fourcade et al., 401.
122. Gabay, 'Ever Failed. No Matter. Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better', 1–3.
123. Fourcade et al., 'On Erik Olin Wright, Envisioning Real Utopias, London and New York, NY, Verso, 2010', 384.
124. Fourcade et al., 384.
125. Fourcade et al., 385.
126. Sousa Santos, 'The Alternative to Utopia Is Myopia', 577.
127. Lewis R. Gordon, 'Re-Imagining Liberations', *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies* 1, no. 1 (2018): 27.
128. Cigdem Cidam, *In the Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 37–38.
129. Ahdaf Soueif, *Cairo* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2014), 91.
130. Soueif, 22.
131. Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, 'Responsibility, Violence, and Catastrophe', *Constellations* 15, no. 1 (March 2008): 100, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8675.2008.00476.x.
132. Soueif, *Cairo*, 349.
133. Cidam, *In the Street*, 21–22.
134. Dean, The Communist Horizon, 212.
135. Dean, 210.
136. Dean, 210.
137. Dean, 211.
138. Dean, 223.
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140. Markoff, Lazar and Smith, 13–15.
141. Hutchings, 'Revolutionary Thinking', 64.
142. Luxemburg, The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg, 354.
143. Watson, 'Repoliticizing the Left', 87.
144. Rose, Women in Dark Times, 4.
145. Gordon and Cornell, 'I Have a Thousand More Things I Want to Say to You', 22.
146. Rose, Women in Dark Times, 42.
147. Bethania Assy and Basak Ertür, 'Supplements: Law and Resistance–Turkey and Brazil', *Law and Critique* 25, no. 1 (February 2014): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10978-013-9131-3.
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150. Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions', in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 198.
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153. Gordon, 'Re-Imagining Liberations', 21.
154. Jodi Dean and Mat Callahan, 'The Party, the Comrade and Communist Renewal in the 21st Century', *Socialism and Democracy* 34, no. 2–3 (1 September 2020): 232, https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2020.1820307.
155. Dean and Callahan, 232.
156. Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution', 308.
157. Blättler and Marti, 'Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt', 91.
158. Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (New York: Verso, 2016), 22.
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