

Dice

August 16, 1978

Dear Stephen Eric Bronner,

Thank you very much for sending me the Letters of Rosa Luxemburg which are surely the most comprehensive collection in the English language and will answer a pressing need, not only from the Women's Liberation Movement who are now at the crossroads and are searching for more fundamental answers, but also from scholars in the general field of European history. Your reflections on Rosa will help them wade through 250 pages of letters on multitudinous questions.

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Since I do not know whether you already have a publisher who has accepted the manuscript as is, or whether you consider this still open to change, I will be brief with my critique. What I missed most is dialectics, that is to say, that your commentary didn't seem to flow out of these letters. Naturally I do not mean that you have to agree with Rosa's views, or that your essay needs to be limited to the letters. You correctly stress the fact that you wish to present her as a total person, not separating the political and social views from the personal life, or keeping each aspect of her life compartmentalized. But for that very reason, it appears to me, there shouldn't be this immediate plunge on your part to your own views before you present that total human being. It seemed to me something as simple as transposing certain sentences from other sections would acquaint the reader with Rosa. For example, if after your second paragraph (p.viii) you use the last 2 sentences of p.ix, when Rosa says "I, too, am a land of boundless possibilities," and perhaps even the last paragraph on p.xiii, you would not spoil the sequence of your own thoughts, and yet have the reader not feel that he/she doesn't know Rosa.

May I say that I believe such minor lapses in style are due to major downplaying of Rosa's role as theoretician? Take p.xxxi, "The plane of abstract theory meant very little to Rosa Luxemburg." How can one say that--and use the youthful word, "always," which my generation would avoid like the plague--when her work Reform or Revolution? was absolutely the most profound answer to Bernstein's revisionism, whether it was Plekhanov or anyone of that recognized "theoretical" stature who was the author of the attack on reformism? Or how can one say that of the author of Accumulation of Capital? (I happen to disagree with her views and wrote quite a sharp critique of it, but that can't take away the originality of the work.) And how can you possibly say, (at least say without mentioning that Luxemburg thought it was her greatest work) that her Anti-Critique was an "occasional pamphlet"? I know what you mean. She was an activist, a revolutionary, very concerned with concrete work rather than abstract writings, and every man from Nettl to Dick Howard has taken advantage of that woman of action to downgrade her theoretical grasp. But, neither the men nor Rosa herself can be taken as the judge of her writings. History does that, and it would be wise for a critic to leave the question open.

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PS: I should have called to your attention that in Pachter's Preface, the remarks about Poland "heavily editing" Rosa's works will be questioned. It is my understanding that since Poland dare not openly oppose Russia, the beauty has taken to publishing anything and everything by Rosa and thus at least indirectly criticizing Russia. In any case, I have a letter from Prof. Dr. Feliks Tylich who heads the Institute for Publishing Rosa Luxemburg, who assures me that no editing exceptsfer "intime" parts as done.

I loved your section on Rosa in prison. There you were both lyrical and objective as well as showing insight into her thought and life. Put how can you go from that, more or less to a summation, without either taking in the German Revolution or her death? Surely it isn't enough merely to have mentioned that she was a martyr; that, too, can be deadening unless one sees why she was very nearly "passive" on the question because, as she put it, "revolution is magnificent, all else is bilge."

May I also say that in one case I thought your remark was gratuitous? I'm referring to p.xliii on her choice of friends being "arbitrary and often petty." I'm sure that each one of us may look arbitrary in our choice of friends to someone who has a very different estimate of the persons involved, but Rosa petty? I remember reading one of her letters to Disfenbach--I don't remember whether you include it or not--where she apologizes for having been rude and unthinking to a comrade who turned out to be very great. Whereupon she adds that perhaps it was a reaction to his not being able to stand women who are as active as she was. And oh, those magnificent letters to Mathilde Wurm! In any case, couldn't you say "seemed to be arbitrary" and eliminate the word "often" before "petty." Indeed, why not cut out that last word altogether.

Now, as to the letters themselves. It seems to me that you cannot throw that many letters at the reader without some indication of subjects, or historic periods, or some sort of division, so that the reader need not read everything at once, but rather chose between what he/she would rather look at first. I have 5 or 6 suggestions, such as pp.1-32 could be Rosa enters the German scene; pp.33-62, which after all begins a new century and deserves a separation, but besides which 1900-1905 is a true watershed. The third part, pp.63-90, would be a magnificent section on her arrival on the scene in Poland during the 1905 revolution. (Oh heavens, I forgot the very remark that hurt me most and was absolutely uncalled for, when you say on p.xviii that "stung by the challenge" from Rev. Friedrich Naumann who said she was sitting safely in Germany while the revolution was going on in Russia and Poland, she "left immediately thereafter for Warsaw." That is fantastic! To think that Rosa, a revolutionary, the one who had changed her whole life and presented her theory of general strike, who sat in many prisons very nearly "happily" just because she was so full of hatred for the system, that she preferred that to any kowtowing to capitalism, would have gone on the basis of a remark by a liberal?)

Pp. 91-119; couldn't that be a new section on the question of either the general strike or the Morocco crisis, or the break with Karl Kautsky, or the singling out of Clara Zetkin? Section 5, therefore, pp.120-156 could go on further to take in not only the eve of WWI but her stay in prison and Junius pamphlet. Or you could have a new part 6 and conclusion whether or not you take in certain points on the German revolution, or leave it to your commentary to deal with her death.

Yours,

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