
III. ASPIRATION CORNER

Anticipating Degrowth: Reading Luxemburg and Benjamin Towards an Alternative Politics of Democracy

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Abstract: This article engages with the political writings of Rosa Luxemburg and Walter Benjamin to explore how their thought unsettles dominant conceptions of democracy and revolution. Rather than offering fixed models, both thinkers focus on the role of spontaneity, revolution, and collective agency in political life. Luxemburg's critique of centralized socialism and Benjamin's rejection of linear historical progress converge in a shared resistance to administrative politics. By placing their ideas in dialogue with contemporary debates on degrowth and democratic form, the article argues for a reimagining of political agency in an age marked by ecological and institutional crisis.

Keywords: Luxemburg, Benjamin, democracy, revolution, spontaneity, degrowth

I. Introduction

In recent years, degrowth has emerged not merely as an ecological critique of capitalist expansion, but as a broader questioning of the political imagination structured by growth. Against this setting, the writings of Rosa Luxemburg and Walter Benjamin offer productive ground for a rethinking of democratic politics in ways that anticipate—rather than prescribe—alternatives to dominant models of development.

Although separated by different contexts and intellectual traditions, Luxemburg and Benjamin share a deep concern with the conditions under which meaningful political agency becomes possible. Luxemburg's defense of democratic spontaneity, expressed most forcefully in her critique of Leninist centralism, resonates with Benjamin's insistence that history is not a continuum to be administered but a rupture to be seized. Both resist the notion that emancipation arrives through managerial

planning or historical inevitability. Instead, they direct us toward a politics rooted in contingency, memory, and collective action.

The author reads their writings not as historical artifacts nor as sources for ideological synthesis, but as sites of political imagination that remain untimely, interrupting the present by refusing its dominant assumptions. By placing Luxemburg and Benjamin into a shared critical frame, the article asks how their political thought may contribute to a democratic orientation beyond the imperatives of growth and control. Such a re-reading does not propose a ready-made model but seeks to illuminate concepts and sensibilities that might inform an alternative democratic politics in an age of limits. This article employs a comparative textual analysis of selected writings by Rosa Luxemburg and Walter Benjamin, focusing on their conceptualizations of democracy, revolution, and historical activity. Through this approach, it seeks to explain how their thought may inform alternative democratic politics in an age of ecological and political limits. To understand the political urgency and conceptual nuance of their writings, it is worth briefly revisiting the biographical positions from which both Luxemburg and Benjamin were thinking.

The concept of degrowth, as a critique of the imperative of economic expansion, aligns with Luxemburg's and Benjamin's resistance to linear historical progress and instrumental politics. Luxemburg's emphasis on democratic spontaneity and Benjamin's notion of ruptured temporality challenge the foundational assumptions of capitalist modernity. In this light, degrowth is not merely an economic proposal but a political reorientation—one that privileges collective agency, historical memory, and non-accumulative forms of life. Their writings offer a framework for imagining democracy not as a managerial system of distribution, but as a space for radical interruption and redefinition of social priorities.

She was uncompromising in her critique both of capitalism and of bureaucratic authoritarian socialism. For this reason, and in part also due to her tragic death, her legacy has been appropriated (and distorted) by both Western Marxists keen to chart an alternative path to state socialism, and socialist states attracted to her theory of capitalist crisis and her radical critique of social democracy.¹ These competing appropriations often strip Luxemburg's writing of its tension: her insistence that de-

¹ Lea Ypi, "Rosa Luxemburg," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2023 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2023), accessed August 25, 2025, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/luxemburg/>.

mocracy is inseparable from struggle, that political form cannot be engineered from above, that even the strike resists capture. To revisit her work today is not to memorialize but to disturb—to recover a kind of thinking that unsettles both liberal and revolutionary certainty. In this sense, Luxemburg’s thought offers a vital resource for contemporary movements that seek to reclaim democracy from technocratic management and elite control. Her emphasis on spontaneity and bottom-up organization resonates with climate justice activism, feminist assemblies, and anti-authoritarian struggles that reject centralized leadership in favor of collective agency. Luxemburg’s vision of decentralized political organization links with degrowth’s emphasis on dismantling technocratic control and fostering true collective agency. Rather than offering a blueprint, Luxemburg invites us to embrace the unpredictability of political life—a stance that remains profoundly relevant in an age of ecological and democratic crisis.

These competing appropriations often strip Luxemburg’s writing of its tension: her insistence that democracy is inseparable from struggle, that political form cannot be engineered from above, that even the strike resists capture. As William A. Pelz notes: “Luxemburg anticipates and illuminates our current predicament: how the endemic structural and moral imbalances of capitalism will not be resolved by the system and pose an increasing threat to the very survival of our species. Today, while the crises mount, large segments of the current ‘left’ seem to have lost faith in their own solutions and remedies. Thus, creatively reconnecting with Rosa Luxemburg’s critiques has the potential to be an important catalyst in rebuilding and expanding a successful democratic and revolutionary left today and in the future.”²

Presenting Walter Benjamin’s (1892–1940) contributions to political philosophy is not the same as illuminating the attitudes of a political thinker focused on a particular problematic, or a philosopher who has established a system.³ Walter Benjamin was one of the most intriguing and original Marxist cultural theorists of the twentieth century. He made a precarious living in Berlin as a literary journalist and, partly under the

² William A. Pelz, *Rosa Luxemburg: Complete Works, Volume III – Political Writings 1: On Revolution (1897–1905)*, ed. Peter Hudis et al. (London: Verso Books, 2019), 31.

³ B. Erdağı, “Walter Benjamin and Political Philosophy,” *Sofia Philosophical Review* 7, no. 2 (2013): 34.

influence of Ernst Bloch and Lukács, turned toward the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. In the late 1920s, he became a close friend of Brecht, championing his revolutionary “epic theater.” Driven from Germany in 1933 by the rise of Nazism, Benjamin settled in Paris, where he had close associations with the surrealists. When the Nazis invaded France, Benjamin fled to the Spanish frontier, where, on being denied entry, he committed suicide rather than risk being delivered to the SS. Benjamin’s writings are a curious mixture of esoteric, sometimes mystical Jewish thought, artistic modernism, and unorthodox Marxism. He united an apocalyptic vision of history with a concern for the material, productive basis of art. Fascinated by tradition yet a radical spokesman for the new technological media, steeped in high German philosophy but a champion of the proletariat, Benjamin was in turn philologist, literary critic, political commentator, and philosopher of history.⁴ Despite its pronounced esotericism and manifestly recondite character, Benjamin’s early literary criticism is consistent, at times single-minded, in the pursuit of its program. At issue is the “fallen” character of human history, such that it takes on the appearance of “natural history”, a history that is consigned to an inexorable, rigid fate of decay and decline. The subjective corollary of this fate is an inescapable network of guilt—a guilt which originates with man’s expulsion from Paradise, which is redoubled with each subsequent transgression, and which serves as a ceaseless testimony to the seemingly infinite distance that separates historical man, man in the here and now, from the state of grace represented by the Messianic era.⁵

II. Critical Evaluation of Rosa Luxemburg: “Leninism or Marxism”

“Leninism or Marxism” was published as an article in 1904 under the title “*Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy*” in *Iskra* and *Neue Zeit*, and later reprinted in pamphlet form titled *Marxism vs. Leninism* in 1935 by the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation.⁶ Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin’s concept of revolutionary organi-

⁴ Norbert Bolz and Willem van Reijen, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Humanities Press, 1995), 5.

⁵ Richard Wolin, “*From Messianism to Materialism: The Later Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin*,” *New German Critique* 22 (Winter 1981): 81.

⁶ Libcom.org, “*Leninism or Marxism – Rosa Luxemburg*,” accessed August 25, 2025, <https://libcom.org/article/leninism-or-marxism-rosa-luxemburg>.

zation shows the disagreements within the Marxist movements in Europe in the years preceding 1917; her comparisons with Blanquism and chillingly accurate predictions of the consequences of such organization in a successful revolution are incredibly important to an understanding of the differing interpretations of Marx at that time in relation to the State.⁷

Rosa Luxemburg's critique within the Marxist discourse of her time was notably focused on the specific conditions of revolutionary movements in Russia and its breach from established Marxist principles. In her text, she stated: "An unprecedented task in the history of the socialist movement has fallen to the lot of the Russian Social Democracy. It is the task of deciding on what is the best socialist tactical policy in a country where absolute monarchy is still dominant."⁸ The phrase emphasizes the difficulty of determining the most effective socialist strategy in a nation that is predominantly governed by an absolute monarchy. In Russia, without democratic institutions, the Tsarist regime held authoritarian control over the country. It was restricting civil liberties and suppressing political dissent. Rosa Luxemburg pointed out the immense challenge for socialists in Russia to navigate this oppressive political landscape while striving to advance socialist principles.

Furthermore, Luxemburg presents the challenge posed by the covert domination of the bourgeoisie under absolutist force in Russia, stating: "The principal difficulty faced by socialist activity in Russia results from the fact that in that country the domination of the bourgeoisie is veiled by absolutist force. This gives socialist propaganda an abstract character, while immediate political agitation takes on a democratic-revolutionary guise."⁹ Thus, Luxemburg defines how the absence of direct bourgeois rule in Russia obscured the struggle's focus and necessitated a different approach to socialist propaganda and immediate political agitation, which had to assume a democratic-revolutionary form. Therefore, by drawing attention to the distinct circumstances in Russia, Rosa Luxemburg reveals the challenge faced by socialists in adapting Marxist principles to a context that diverged significantly from the more

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rosa Luxemburg, "Leninism or Marxism," in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Rainwater (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 161.

⁹ Ibid., 162.

established Western European practice. She addressed the question of how the Russian situation fits into Marxist ideas—by stressing the importance of changing the way of socialist agitation and adapting to those circumstances.

Now we should elaborate Luxemburg's perspective on the issue of the vanguard party—the concept proposed by Lenin in his work *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*. In her critique of Lenin, as an aberration from her own views on how revolutionary movements should be organized, Luxemburg's perspective challenges the idea of a rigidly centralized vanguard party. Hence, she expresses her disagreement with Lenin's ultra-centralist tendencies, stating: "Lenin's thesis is that the party Central Committee should have the privilege of naming all the local committees of the party. It should have the right to appoint the effective organs of all local bodies from Geneva to Liège, from Tomsk to Irkutsk. It should also have the right to impose on all of them its own ready-made rules of party conduct. It should have the right to rule without appeal on such questions as the dissolution and reconstitution of local organizations."¹⁰ We may see from here that Luxemburg challenges Lenin's approach as overly authoritarian and centralized, wherein the central committee is granted extensive powers over all local party organs without room for dissent or democratic decision-making within the party structure. This stands in contrast to her vision of a more decentralized and participatory organizational structure.

Additionally, she also criticizes Lenin's approach by stating: "Such centralism is a mechanical transposition of the organizational principles of Blanquism into the mass movement of the socialist working class."¹¹ In accordance with this view, Lenin defines his "revolutionary Social Democrat" as a "Jacobin joined to the organization of the proletariat, which has become conscious of its class interests."¹² From that, Luxemburg compares Lenin's idea of the revolutionary Social Democrat to a Jacobin, implying that it leans toward a top-down approach reminiscent of Blanquist organizational principles.

The term "Blanquism" is connected with the political thought and practice of the 19th-century French socialist revolutionary Auguste Blanqui. Blanqui was an active member of the socialist movement for

¹⁰ Luxemburg, "*Leninism or Marxism*," 161.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 162.

more than half a century. His activity started in 1824 when he entered his first conspiratorial organization and lasted until his death in 1881. He took part in many major events, such as the Spring of Nations and the Paris Commune, although he spent most of his life in various prisons. While Blanqui was a member of the revolutionary generation that included Bakunin and Marx and Engels, whose ideas shaped the main currents of the socialist movement, Blanqui and his ideas were not greatly successful. Blanqui and Blanquism became symbols of a blind radicalism and an anti-democratic, hierarchical, and thus utopian way of thinking about socialist organization. Blanqui accepted socialism as a system that could lead to a just redistribution of welfare, but contrary to Marx he never believed in the leading role of the proletariat in revolutionary struggle; neither did he believe that any popular movement could achieve his goals. He thought that a small, conspiratorial group of revolutionaries could organize a kind of putsch and introduce a temporary dictatorship that would prepare the ground for socialist transition.¹³

Importantly, Rosa Luxemburg emphasizes another discourse: the crucial role of spontaneous mass action as a driving force in revolutionary movements. Luxemburg marks the significance of such spontaneous actions in contrast to a more strongly structured, centralized approach to revolution. Luxemburg expresses her belief in the importance of spontaneous popular movements, stating: “Even in Russia, the people’s movement has succeeded in overcoming the barriers set up by the state. The people have found themselves a ‘constitution’ (though a rather precarious one) in street disorders. Persevering in this course, the Russian people will in time attain complete victory over the autocracy.”¹⁴ This statement suggests Luxemburg’s optimism about the potential for the Russian people. Through their continued resistance and struggle, they will eventually achieve victory over the autocratic regime. She recognized the emergence of a sort of “constitution” in the form of street disorders or popular demonstrations. These street disorders, protests, and the people’s collective actions were seen as a form of resistance against the autocracy—a way in which the population was asserting its will and demanding change. However, she noted that this “constitution” was precarious and not a formalized legal document, but rather an expression of

¹³ Dariusz Winczewski, “*Did Rosa Luxemburg Accuse Lenin of Blanquism? A Different Interpretation*,” *Science & Society* 83 (2019): 538.

¹⁴ Luxemburg, “*Leninism or Marxism*,” 161.

popular discontent and struggle.

Further, Luxemburg critiques the limitations of overly structured approaches, as we see in her comment: “The circumstance has an influence on agitation, on the manner of transplanting socialist doctrine to Russian soil. It also bears in a peculiar and direct way on the question of party organization.”¹⁵ Thus, Luxemburg suggests that the unique circumstances, including the prevalence of spontaneous actions, influence not only the approach to agitation but also the way in which socialist ideology is disseminated and how party organization should be conceptualized. This implies a recognition of the organic nature of revolutionary movements and the need for flexibility in adapting socialist principles to the realities of spontaneous popular actions.

Besides, Luxemburg identified the intersection between democracy and socialism within the context of Marxist ideology. She was particularly spotlighting the importance of democracy as an integral component of socialist movements. She indicates the relationship between democracy and socialism by stating: “The obstacles offered to the socialist movement by the absence of democratic liberties are of relatively secondary importance.”¹⁶ Luxemburg believed that the absence of democracy hindered the development of socialism and its ability to flourish, as democratic rights were essential for fostering active political participation, free speech, and the mobilization of the working class. However, she also argued that despite these obstacles, the core principles of socialism—such as the struggle for social and economic justice, the liberation of the working class, and the transformation of society—were of primary importance. Her use of “relatively secondary importance” suggests that while democratic freedoms are essential for the socialist movement, the absence of these liberties does not nullify the potential for revolutionary action by the people.

Further, she discusses the confluence of democracy and socialism in relation to the revolutionary struggle, asserting: “It is a mistake to draw a rigid parallel between the present Russian situation and that which existed in Germany during the years 1879–90, when Bismarck’s antisocialist laws were in force. The two have one thing in common—police rule. Otherwise, they are in no way comparable.”¹⁷ (Luxemburg,

¹⁵ Luxemburg, “*Leninism or Marxism*,” 161.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

1904/1996, p. 161). Thus, Luxemburg compares the situations in Russia and Germany under repressive regimes. However, she distinguishes between the contexts, suggesting that while both experienced suppression, their historical and political circumstances were significantly different. The period of Bismarck's antisocialist laws in Germany was marked by attempts to suppress socialist and workers' movements through legal restrictions. In contrast, Russia under Tsarist rule had a deeply entrenched autocratic monarchy with severe limitations on civil liberties, widespread censorship, and a lack of democratic institutions. Therefore, she cautions against oversimplification or drawing direct parallels between these distinct historical and political contexts.

Luxemburg pointed out the significance of democracy within the socialist movement: "The Social Democratic movement carries on its activity inside the large bourgeois city. Its mission is to represent, within the boundaries of the national state, the class interests of the proletariat, and to oppose those common interests to all local and group interests."¹⁸ This excerpt posits the mission of the Social Democratic movement and calls its role in representing the class interests of the proletariat within the framework of the national state. This includes urban centers dominated by the bourgeois or capitalist class. The Social Democratic movement aimed to assert and protect the collective interests of the working class against those of the bourgeoisie. Luxemburg highlights the significance of the Social Democratic movement in uniting and advocating for the common interests of the proletariat, transcending local or group interests. This implies that the movement sought to organize and represent the broader class interests of working people across different sectors and regions, fostering solidarity among the working class.

Additionally, Luxemburg commented on the relationship between socialism and democratic struggles: "It is a mistake to believe that it is possible to substitute 'provisionally' the absolute power of a Central Committee (acting somehow by 'tacit delegation') for the yet unrealizable rule of the majority of conscious workers in the party, and in this way replace the open control of the working masses over the party organs with the reverse control by the Central Committee over the revolutionary proletariat."¹⁹ This statement by Rosa Luxemburg reflects her critique of certain practices within socialist or revolutionary organiza-

¹⁸ Luxemburg, "*Leninism or Marxism*," 163.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

tions, particularly her opposition to the idea of substituting the absolute power of a Central Committee for the rule of the majority in the party. Luxemburg expresses her belief that attempting to temporarily substitute the absolute power of a Central Committee, even under tacit delegation of authority, is a mistake. Luxemburg's arguments emphasize the symbiotic relationship between socialism and democracy, asserting that authentic socialism could only be achieved through democratic means and processes.

Rosa Luxemburg's arguments regarding the role of the proletariat in revolutionary change contribute to the broader Marxist tradition by making a point about the proactive role of the working class in shaping revolutionary movements. She stresses the unique position and agency of the proletariat in revolutionary change, stating: "The Russian socialists are obliged to undertake the building of such an organization without the benefit of the formal guarantees commonly found under a bourgeois-democratic setup. They do not dispose of the political raw material that in other countries is supplied by bourgeois society itself."²⁰ Here, Luxemburg points out the distinctive situation of the Russian socialists and the proletariat's need to construct their organizational framework without the institutional support or political infrastructure provided by bourgeois society.

Nevertheless, Rosa Luxemburg also reflects on her analysis from the *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels, on the historical process by which the bourgeoisie: "Under ordinary conditions—that is, where the political domination of the bourgeoisie has preceded the socialist movement—the bourgeoisie itself instills in the working class the rudiments of political solidarity. At this stage, declares the *Communist Manifesto*, the unification of the workers is not yet the result of their own aspiration to unity but comes as a result of the activity of the bourgeoisie, 'which, in order to attain its own political ends, is compelled to set the proletariat in motion...'"²¹ Luxemburg explains that in societies where the bourgeoisie holds political dominance before the emergence of a significant socialist movement, the bourgeoisie itself plays a role in fostering the initial stages of political solidarity among the working class. This process occurs because of the bourgeoisie's pursuit of its own political goals. In seeking to further its own interests within society,

²⁰ Luxemburg, "Leninism or Marxism," 162.

²¹ Ibid., 161.

it engages in actions or policies that inadvertently lead to the mobilization and organization of the working class. It is important to note that her thoughts were in line with the *Communist Manifesto*, which explains how the bourgeoisie pursues political power and economic objectives. Marx wrote: “The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones”²², and “Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class.”²³

III. Background on Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Concept of History* promise a discussion of a new concept of history and, in parallel, a new concept of the present. A characteristic of the work is that at its center there is no discursive explanation; instead, Benjamin operates through images. His concept of history seems to do away with philosophy’s conceptual games and transforms concepts into images that spoil the promise of truth offered by the philosophy of history. For Benjamin, the traditional concepts of history evaporated as he wrote the historical-philosophical theses. He could no longer be convinced that every historical event derives from a linear cause-and-effect relationship, or that all events together constitute a progressive, continuous motion.²⁴

One key aspect of Benjamin’s viewpoint is his departure from historicism. He acknowledges the culmination of historicism in universal history: “Historicism justifiably culminates in universal history.”²⁵ However, Benjamin emphasizes the distinctiveness of historical materi-

²² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, Vol. I (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 3, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/postgraduate/masters/modules/theoryfromthemargins/manifest.pdf>.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁴ Alfredo Lucero-Montaño, “On Walter Benjamin’s Historical Materialism,” *Astrolabio: Revista Internacional de Filosofía* 10 (2010): 126.s

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, “*Theses on the Philosophy of History*,” in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Rainwater (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 222.

alism, particularly in its methodological approach, as he discusses the differences between historicism's method and historical materialism. Here is an excerpt that reflects Benjamin's emphasis on these contrasting approaches: "Materialist historiography differs from it as a method more clearly than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle."²⁶ This statement suggests that while universal history lacks a distinct theoretical framework and tends to accumulate a vast amount of data to fill a uniform, empty concept of time, materialist historiography operates differently. In contrast, it follows a constructive principle, implying that it does not merely accumulate data but rather builds its approach based on a specific guiding principle or theory. Rather than collecting extensive information, it focuses on constructing a deeper understanding.

A crucial perspective of Benjamin's thought is the significance of the present moment in historical materialism. He argues that the historical materialist requires a concept of the present that is not merely a transitional phase. Benjamin articulates this by stating: "The historical materialist cannot do without the concept of a present which is not a transition, in which time originates and has come to a standstill."²⁷ This suggests that for the historical materialist, understanding history involves recognizing a distinct present that is not just a passage from past to future but a moment where time originates and seemingly reaches a standstill. This concept challenges the conventional linear perception of time and emphasizes the significance of the present as a crucial aspect of understanding historical processes.

Moreover, Benjamin critiques the idea of progress tied to an empty and homogeneous time. His statement, "The concept of the progress of the human race in history is not to be separated from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous and empty time"²⁸, expresses this rejection. Benjamin's critique of homogeneous, empty time aligns with degrowth's call to look beyond capitalist acceleration. With this, he stresses a key criticism—the merging of progress with a time devoid of depth or qualitative change. Benjamin confronts the simplistic narrative

²⁶ Benjamin, "*Theses on the Philosophy of History*," 220.1

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

of progress tethered to an unchanging, homogeneous timeline, dismantling the linear notion of historical development.

Important to Benjamin's thesis is the concept of messianic time—a utopian idea of time that interrupts the linear flow of history. He describes the present as a model of messianic time, suggesting: "The present, which, as the model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in enormous abridgment, coincides exactly with the stature which the history of mankind has in the universe."²⁹ Benjamin's idea suggests that the current moment can be seen as a representation of messianic time, containing the entire history of humanity in condensed form.

Benjamin's perspective hints at a messianic element within historical materialism, suggesting the revolutionary potential inherent in historical moments. He illustrates this by stating: "He perceives it in order to explode a specific epoch out of the homogeneous course of history; thus exploding a specific life out of the epoch, or a specific work out of the life-work."³⁰ This highlights the significance of isolated moments or events, indicating their potential for revolutionary change beyond conventional historical analysis. This notion challenges the linear trajectory by advocating for a focus on discrete moments, rejecting a singular, unbroken historical continuum. Additionally, this statement implies the crucial role of specific epochs or moments catalyzed by individual actions, which disrupt the linear course of history. This explanation demonstrates that individual lives possess the potential to transcend their respective epochs by influencing broader historical contexts and engendering significant change.

Benjamin asserts the importance of dialectical thinking in historical materialism as he contrasts historicism's additive method with the materialist's constructive principle. He argues: "The materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle."³¹ Thus, Benjamin introduces the concept of the *monad* in historical materialism. He argues that the historical materialist approaches historical objects as monads—a term that refers to a singular, self-contained unit in philosophy, often representing an indivisible and distinct entity. He writes: "The historical materialist approaches a historical subject only

²⁹ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 222.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

where he encounters it as a monad.”³² This approach allows for a careful examination of the subject’s unique characteristics, dynamics, and context within the larger framework of history.

It should be noted that Walter Benjamin was probably referring to the French Revolution and the French Revolutionary Calendar (in French: *Calendrier Révolutionnaire Français*) when he emphasizes the revolutionary potential embedded within everyday objects and practices: “The great revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera. And it is basically the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of historical consciousness (...).”³³ He presents the idea that common terrestrial elements—like calendars—might serve as monuments of historical awareness. Perović gives us additional scope when writing about it: “The French Republican calendar in particular tried to do what no other calendar had done: to make time express the intentions of history.”³⁴ Therefore, by introducing a new calendar after the Revolution, it created a tangible and recurring representation of that historical event. This new calendar served as a means of preserving the memory of the Revolution, keeping alive the consciousness of revolutionary ideals, and reminding people of their involvement in shaping history. It was a way of embedding the revolutionary spirit into everyday life, making it a continuous reminder of the transformative power of historical events on society and the role of the individual within specific events.

IV. Comparative Analysis

While from different times, both Rosa Luxemburg and Walter Benjamin offered essential insights into revolutionary movements and the organizational structure within socialist parties. Nevertheless, their perspectives share certain important similarities and commonalities, which need to be properly examined.

Both Luxemburg and Benjamin share a view on the importance of the organic, spontaneous nature of revolutionary actions, which emerge

³² Ibid.

³³ Walter Benjamin, “*Theses on the Philosophy of History*,” 221.

³⁴ Sanja Perovic, “*The French Republican Calendar: Time, History and the Revolutionary Event*,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35, no. 1 (2012): 11

from the masses themselves instead of being centrally directed by a strict hierarchy. Rosa Luxemburg, in her critique of Lenin's concept of ultra-centralism, mentioned: "The most important and fruitful changes in its tactical policy during the last ten years have not been the inventions of several leaders and even less so of any central organizational organs. They have always been the spontaneous product of the movement in ferment."³⁵ This statement suggests that the most significant and effective changes in the tactical strategies of a movement over the past decade have not originated from the ideas or directives of specific leaders or central organizational bodies. Instead, these crucial changes have arisen spontaneously from within the movement itself, emerging organically from the active engagement and dynamism of the people involved.

Similarly, Benjamin's idea of revolutionary action is an expression of the masses' autonomous and authentic initiative: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism."³⁶ He suggests that understanding this recurring "state of emergency" is crucial in shaping our conception of history. Benjamin argues that it is the responsibility of individuals to recognize this perpetual crisis and work towards creating a genuine state of emergency, which, in turn, will strengthen opposition against fascism.

Moreover, Luxemburg and Benjamin both caution against overly rigid organizational structures that stifle the revolutionary spirit and creative potential of the movement. Luxemburg warns against a conservative role played by directing organs of the socialist party: "The tendency is for the directing organs of the socialist party to play a conservative role."³⁷ This suggests that these leadership structures may often prioritize maintaining the status quo rather than advocating for radical change within the party or society. Similarly, Benjamin indirectly critiques the dangers of an overly controlling and centralized structure that limits revolutionary potential: "Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge. In Marx, it appears as the last en-

³⁵ Luxemburg, "*Leninism or Marxism*," 166.

³⁶ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 218.

³⁷ Luxemburg, "*Leninism or Marxism*," 167.

slaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of downtrodden.”³⁸ This might be interpreted as suggesting that the true force behind historical change lies within the oppressed class itself, indicating a reliance on the collective action and initiatives of the masses rather than strict hierarchical directives.

Both thinkers argue for the necessity of a flexible and adaptable approach within the movement, capable of responding to evolving situations. They altogether offer conceptual solutions for degrowth politics—Luxemburg through her emphasis on democratic spontaneity, and Benjamin through his vision of ruptured temporality and historical interruption. Degrowth, if it is to become more than a simple adjustment, has to become an act of democratic defiance—not just an empty rejection of the old order, but a reclaiming force that shapes human history.

Although Luxemburg emphasizes more the importance of encouraging a correct historical appreciation of the forms of struggle corresponding to given situations: “To encourage a correct historic appreciation of the forms of struggle corresponding to the given situations.”³⁹ She suggests the importance of fostering an accurate understanding of historical contexts to comprehend the types of struggles that align with specific situations, as well as the need to recognize and appreciate diverse forms of resistance, protests, or actions suitable to historical circumstances. Benjamin, rather, advocates for political loyalty to principles, telling us: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”⁴⁰ This relates to Benjamin’s emphasis on engaging with the past—not merely for factual accuracy but for the sake of current and future actions. By this, he advocates for political mobility and loyalty to principles, showing the importance of acting within the present while being grounded in historical understanding.

In examining the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg and Walter Benjamin, despite areas of agreement, there are visible differences and contrasting views on important concepts. The first notable dissension lies in their assessment of the role of centralized leadership in socialist movements. Luxemburg’s critique of Leninist ultra-centralism emphasizes that significant shifts in socialist tactics historically arose as spontaneous prod-

³⁸ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 220.

³⁹ Luxemburg, “Leninism or Marxism,” 168.

⁴⁰ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 216.

ucts of the movement itself, asserting: "The ultra-centralism asked by Lenin is full of the sterile spirit of the overseer."⁴¹ This challenges the necessity of strict hierarchical leadership imposing directives. Luxemburg implies that the most crucial and effective shifts in the tactical approaches of these movements have not been orchestrated by leaders or central bodies. Instead, they have emerged naturally and organically from the dynamism and unrest within the movements themselves: "The most important and fruitful changes in its tactical policy...have always been the spontaneous product of the movement in ferment."⁴² Luxemburg's assertion emphasizes the vitality of grassroots movements and the agency of the masses in driving change.

Meanwhile, Benjamin emphasized the historical knowledge and revolutionary potential within the oppressed class, countering the significance of individual leaders and promoting the collective struggles of the masses: "Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge. In Marx, it appears as the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacist group, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats."⁴³ Here, he touches on the issues of historical knowledge and revolutionary potential within the oppressed class. Benjamin suggests that it is not individual figures or leaders but the collective struggles and experiences of the oppressed class throughout history that hold the true repository of historical knowledge.

Benjamin highlights the significance of this conviction, noting its fleeting resurgence within groups like the Spartacists. The statement reflects Benjamin's criticism of Social Democrats who, according to him, have historically been resistant to this idea. It implies that Social Democrats might have been hesitant or opposed to recognizing the revolutionary potential residing within the oppressed class and their role as agents of historical transformation. Furthermore, he deepens the critique by mentioning: "Social Democratic theory, and even more its practice, have been formed by a concept of progress which did not adhere to reality but had dogmatic claims."⁴⁴ Thus, Benjamin highlights a discrepancy

⁴¹ Luxemburg, "Leninism or Marxism," 168.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 220.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 221.

between the theoretical belief in progress held by Social Democrats and the actual realities presented within society. He suggests that Social Democratic theory and practice might have been built upon an idealized or rigid concept of progress that did not align with the lived experiences or historical dynamics of the time.

This critique prompts readers to question ideological constructs detached from actual social, political, and historical realities. It urges a re-evaluation of theoretical frameworks and their relationship to tangible, material conditions. This serves as a reminder to reassess the foundations of ideological beliefs or theories, emphasizing the importance of grounding theoretical concepts in a comprehensive understanding of historical and social realities.

A second contrasting perspective emerges regarding the responsiveness of the socialist movement to historical context. Luxemburg underlines the importance of understanding historical circumstances in tailoring strategies, emphasizing adaptability to specific historical moments: "To encourage a correct historic appreciation of the forms of struggle corresponding to the given situations."⁴⁵ She stresses the need for an accurate appreciation of historical conditions to shape the forms of struggle accordingly. This highlights the adaptability of tactics to the context of the time, aiming for an accurate assessment of historical conditions to guide methods of resistance and struggle. In contrast, Benjamin's focus diverges from tailoring strategies to specific historical moments; instead, he emphasizes a different aspect. In his text, Benjamin accentuates the concept of *Jetztzeit*,⁴⁶ which denotes a rupture in historical continuity. His emphasis lies in disrupting the linear flow of history and envisioning a revolutionary consciousness that seeks redemption in the present moment. Benjamin writes: "The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action."⁴⁷ Benjamin's focus lies on the revolutionary rupture in the continuum of history, which might not directly align with the strategy of adapting tactics to specific historical moments.

⁴⁵ Luxemburg, "Leninism or Marxism," 168.

⁴⁶ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 221.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 221.

V. Conclusions

Throughout this analysis, it has been visible that both Luxemburg and Benjamin share common ground. First is their concern with the organic nature of revolutionary movements. Second is their skepticism toward overly rigid structures and their emphasis on the spontaneous character of revolutionary actions. Rosa Luxemburg's critique of centralized leadership and advocacy for the spontaneity of revolutionary actions align her with Benjamin's skepticism toward control mechanisms and his concern for the stifling effect of rigid systems.

Rosa Luxemburg is not a marginal but a marginalized protagonist in the history of 20th-century political thought.⁴⁸ Her contributions centered on the organic development of revolution from the masses, her critique of party centralization, and her advocacy for grassroots revolutionary movements. Her ideas remain significant in highlighting the complexities and challenges of revolution, especially in balancing spontaneity and organization. As Erdağı notes about Walter Benjamin: "Benjamin, like Marx, has placed history and materialism at the center of thinking and politics (...)."⁴⁹ His focus on critique and skepticism toward oppressive systems provides a broader philosophical lens for understanding societal structures and their impact on revolutionary fervor. He enriches Marxist theory by highlighting the potential risks of overly rigid party structures. The philosophical challenge he poses to linear notions of progress and his assertion of the vital importance of critical historical moments resonate with those advocating for transformative societal change. As Neil Davidson states: "In other words, we need to see Benjamin's work not in opposition to the classical tradition, but as a contribution which enriches it, by deepening our understanding of some key themes and addressing others which had hitherto been absent."⁵⁰

Today, Luxemburg's and Benjamin's ideas hold relevance in socio-political discourse, particularly in assessing the dynamics between spontaneity and structure within social movements. At the same time, efforts on the left to restore radicality to democracy as a political form

⁴⁸ Alexandra Kemmerer, "Editing Rosa: Luxemburg, the Revolution, and the Politics of Infantilization," *The European Journal of International Law* 27, no. 3 (2016): 853.

⁴⁹ Erdağı, "Walter Benjamin and Political Philosophy," 55.

⁵⁰ Neil Davidson, "Walter Benjamin and the Classical Marxist Tradition," *International Socialism* 2, no. 121 (Winter 2009), accessed August 25, 2025, <https://marxists.architexturez.net/history/etol/writers/davidson/2009/xx/benjamin.html>.

remain significantly contested.⁵¹ In other words, democratization is predominantly subject to the elites' interests rather than dependent on other sociological factors. However, democracy is a wealth-redistributive political system, and once instituted the elite might still bear economic incentives to mount a coup and revert a country to non-democracy—a typical example of which is the history of political transitions in Latin America in the 20th century.⁵²

Therefore, by exploring how modern movements balance organization with spontaneity, as well as considering the implications of rigid structures on revolutionary potential, studying alternative organizational models might be a promising area for further research, as well as the efficient work of social democratic parties in 21st-century political systems. Thus, the influence of Luxemburg and Benjamin goes beyond Marxism, as these scholars have skillfully united their ideas into intersectional analyses.

The overall aim of intersectional analysis is to explore intersecting patterns between different structures of power and how people are simultaneously positioned—and position themselves—in multiple categories such as gender, class, and ethnicity. The intersectional approach is consequently based on a non-additive principle that refers to how different social categories mutually constitute each other as overall forms of social differentiation or systems of oppression, creating complex identities where different identifications are always mutually constitutive.⁵³ Moreover, understanding the complex relationship between power structures and revolutionary impulses remains a pertinent way for deeper exploration within the contemporary contexts of degrowth philosophy.

Therefore, Luxemburg and Benjamin offer not only theoretical insights on freedom, revolution, and collective agency, but also practical orientation stones for movements seeking to reclaim democracy from the ruling elites, as degrowth does.

⁵¹ John McSweeney, "Giving Politics an Edge: Rancière and the Anarchic Principle of Democracy," *Sofia Philosophical Review* 3, no. 1 (2009): 118.

⁵² Elias Sarantis, "Contemporary Political Development: Towards a Weaker Democracy," *Sofia Philosophical Review* 11, no. 2 (2018): 85.

⁵³ Ann-Dorte Christensen and Sune Qvortrup Jensen, "Doing Intersectional Analysis: Methodological Implications for Qualitative Research," *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 20, no. 2 (2012): 110.