

Rosa Luxemburg and the International of Letters

A new book inspired by Rosa Luxemburg's famous letters shows how dialogue can happen across a diverse and often divided international Left.



Everyone in 'Post Rosa' has some connection with Rosa Luxemburg, having written on her, translated her, or engaged in some other way, but that's often where the similarity ends. (Wikimedia Commons)

Rosa Luxemburg is often treated today as a symbol and an icon more than a thinker. Yet she is a good person to think with, especially at a moment in which the Left is again riven with tensions between different and apparently irreconcilable positions. Luxemburg, like many of us, was a lot of things at once. She was a Pole, a Jew, a woman, a person with a disability, an 'eastern' Marxist, a militant of the tiny Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania and a leader of the 'western' Left in the world's biggest socialist organisation, the German SPD, and an extreme opponent of nationalism to the level of abstraction. Politically, she was a revolutionary socialist who alternated from moment to moment in the same texts from being fiercely critical of the Bolshevik Revolution to even more brutal put-downs of

those who opposed it. She was also, of course, a great writer of letters.

Many letters from one part of the Left to another are being written right now. Ukrainian leftist Volodymyr Artiukh's recent and very powerful letter to western leftists '[on your and our mistakes](#)' is withering on the question of how much a focus on the USA above all else has led to poor analysis and a lack of solidarity. But what it also points out is how much the 'eastern' Left after the fall of Soviet state socialism has learned from the West. This isn't a minor issue. For instance, in the 1990s reformed Eastern European socialists such as the Polish Solidarity leader [Jacek Kuron](#) shelved their critiques of capitalism. Let the free market rip, and ignore those old comrades in London or Paris warning that not all was rosy in the West. This was something that Kuron later publicly regretted, as the new capitalism opened up enormous social divides in his home country. So sometimes the allegedly pampered, self-important western Left is right about things. But sometimes, it screws up.

Yet as much as there's an east/west question within the Left, there's an at the very least equally important north/south one. Rather than seeing similar struggles of oppressed countries as linked, geopolitics focuses us on either attacking or supporting 'our' imperialism. So, leftists who would never accept 'spheres of influence' arguments about Cuba or Mexico happily make them about Ukraine; liberal and conservative supporters of Ukraine more commonly compare that country's predicament today to the aggressor state of Israel rather than to that of Palestine.

Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichorn's project *Post Rosa: Letters Against Barbarism* doesn't explicitly set out to create dialogues between leftists east and west, north and south, but that's what emerges from it. Coming from the editor of the delightfully strange and similarly internationalist [Lenin 150](#), it uses the name of one of the Left's great figures from the past—here, a rather less controversial one—as a way of situating the Left in the present, at a time which, as he points out in his introduction, feels to many to be a depressive and defeated one, after all the near-misses of the 2010s. So each contributor, most of whom are activists and/or intellectuals of the global Left, has a dialogue in three or four letters; these are, as in *Lenin 150*, supplemented with quirky visual material, here consisting of stamps and first-day-covers featuring the Polish revolutionary, alongside quotes from Luxemburg's letters in the various languages of the book's contributors, from English to Spanish Vietnamese to Polish to Swahili, and encouraging images of trees, leaves, and flowers, often shared by the letter-writers with each other.

The real subject of the book, as Joffre-Eichorn puts it in his own letter to Peter Hudis, is as follows: 'How does the importance of RL differ and change when viewed from once again military ruled Burma, from Gaza under fire or from Columbia suffering ongoing state-sponsored terrorism?', and how does how we read her work change whether 'we are overworked and underpaid health workers in Kenya, increasingly despondent peace activists in Eastern Ukraine or literally drowning climate justice warriors in the sinking Maldives?'

This idea is then connected with the way Luxemburg (letter-writer Helen C. Scott cautions against the rather diminishing familiar ‘Rosa’, something that would never be used with ‘Vladimir’ Lenin) was unrestrained and personal in her letter writing, which showed, to the surprise of the first editors of those letters, how deeply interested she was in, well, everything—poetry, animal life, the natural world, and much else, the sort of (to use a naff political journalism term) ‘hinterland’ that Luxemburg’s great frenemy Lenin notoriously didn’t just lack but actively [disdained](#). If all this sounds a little twee, sometimes it is—there really is a moment in *Post Rosa* when Swedish leftist Rebecca Selberg recommends the music of Manu Chao to her Kenyan counterpart Maureen Kasuku—but it is also warm, charming, and imaginative.

The content of the letters ranges from accounts of local struggles, sharing of poetry and favourite Brecht quotes, family histories, and the venting of beefs. Paul Mason, the only British letter-writer, is in his letters to the Turkish Marxist philosopher Sevgi Doğan, extremely concerned with expressing his eccentric takes on Corbynism, Stalinism, and ‘Anti-Humanism’, and generally separating the sheep from the goats. But rather than drawing lines, what comes across in the book is ‘Luxemburgians’ from around the world attempting to understand each other from what can be quite irreconcilable positions.

Everyone in the book has some connection with Luxemburg, having written on her, translated her or engaged in some other way, but that’s often where the similarity ends. *Post Rosa* includes edgy left-communists, committed Marxist-Humanist ‘Luxemburgians’, and scholars of her work such as Paul Le Blanc, Helen C. Scott, and Peter Hudis, and also letter-writers who grew up in Polish state socialism, and two members of governing Communist Parties, Xiong Min in China and Nguyen Hong Duc in Vietnam. The Kenyan and Swedish militants politely talk around the obvious fact that their experiences of ‘capitalism’ are quite different from each other’s. These perspectives are often so different that you can read between the lines a tension between the letter-writers, but most of all, they are patient to learn from each other and listen. So as Joffre-Eichorn says in his introduction, ‘let’s start chatting’—or, to quote one of the figures in our own pantheon, ‘this is my truth, tell me yours’.

Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichorn’s [Post Rosa: Letters Against Barbarism](#) is available to order from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation’s New York City office.