

## Chapter 8

# “The Living Pulsebeat of the Revolution”

## *Reading Luxemburg and Du Bois on the Strike*

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In her 1906 pamphlet *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*, Rosa Luxemburg pointed to three revolutions—the French Revolution, the German Revolution of March 1848, and the Russian Revolution of 1905—as the touchstones of the modern class struggle. Together these events formed a “continuous chain of development in which the fortunes and the end of the capitalist century are to be seen” (Luxemburg, 2008b: 164). The Revolution of 1905, especially, marked the closure of the liberal period and the opening of a new phase of proletarian class struggle. It was in that moment that the Russian proletariat had first realized the potential of the mass strike, thereby introducing “a new epoch in the development of the labor movement” (Luxemburg, 2008b: 112).

However, Luxemburg’s formulation ignored another monumental period in the history of nineteenth-century class struggles: the U.S. Civil War, emancipation, and the attempted social revolution of the Reconstruction. In itself, this omission is not surprising. The United States appears only sporadically in Luxemburg’s works. Moreover, at the time of her writing *The Mass Strike*, interpretations of Reconstruction were dominated by the nascent pro-southern Dunning School. It was not until the appearance of W. E. B. Du Bois’s monumental *Black Reconstruction in America* in 1935 that the Civil War and the Reconstruction era were treated as a social revolution and an emancipatory class project.<sup>1</sup> Like Luxemburg, Du Bois was interested in the strike as

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<sup>1</sup> I adopt the notion of the Reconstruction as a failed social revolution from the work of Eric Foner, whose understanding of the Reconstruction converges with Du Bois’s on this point. See Foner

it related to class struggles and capitalist development, albeit in a context that she did not explore in detail. Among his most original—as well as controversial—insights was that enslaved persons were a “black proletariat” whose abandonment of the plantations in a “general strike” played a decisive role in the Union victory.<sup>2</sup>

Luxemburg and Du Bois were born only three years apart, in 1871 and 1868, respectively, although the abrupt end of her life and the longevity of his may obscure the fact that they were contemporaries. Their trajectories also involve something of a missed encounter, for Du Bois spent 1892–1894 studying in Berlin, while Luxemburg moved there in 1898. Given that Du Bois frequented the meetings of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) during his time there, it is likely that they would have crossed paths if their timelines had overlapped even slightly (Lewis, 1993; Du Bois, 1998b). They also shared the experience of writing from geographic and cultural margins: Luxemburg as a Polish Jewish woman in the heavily male Second International, Du Bois as a black man who spent his entire life grappling with the legacy of slavery and the shadow of Jim Crow (Hudis and Anderson, 2004; Mullen, 2016; Lewis, 1993, 2001). Finally, both had complicated relationships to the dominant interpretations of Marxist theory and politics during their times. In life, Luxemburg forcefully pushed back against the evolutionary tendencies of German Social Democracy in the years following the adoption of the Erfurt Program in 1891, while in death Communist orthodoxy painted her as an intellectual ally of Trotskyism (Geras, 2015: 43–45). Du Bois’s relationship to Marxism and the Communist movement was even more fraught, as in his most pessimistic moments he concluded that racial divisions between the interests of the black and white working classes were an irreconcilable obstacle (Du Bois, 1995). As a result, at the time of *Black Reconstruction*’s publication, neither Du Bois nor Luxemburg had much standing in the Communist organizations tied to the Third International.

Beyond these suggestive overlaps, my goal in this essay is to explore a more specific convergence between Luxemburg and Du Bois: their shared understanding of the mass/general strike as a revolutionary practice that manifests the collective agency of the working class. Taking *The Mass Strike* and *Black Reconstruction* as representative works for this position, we can see that these writings spanned at least four distinct historical moments: the United States in 1860–1880 (the subject of *Black Reconstruction*), Tsarist

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(1990, 2013, 2014). However, for important differences in Foner’s and Du Bois’s accounts, see Ignatiev (1993).

<sup>2</sup> I use the term enslaved persons rather than slaves to underscore the violent and coercive nature of enslavement as social practice, and the personhood of the people on whom these acts were committed.

Russia in 1905–1906 (the subject of *The Mass Strike*), pre-World War I Imperial Germany (Luxemburg’s standpoint an author), and the interwar United States (Du Bois’s standpoint). However, these events and their textual representations were embedded in a common spatiotemporal matrix of global and uneven capitalist development. Although they were situated in radically different contexts, this fact allows us to pose and comparatively examine how they theorized working-class subjectivity and self-organization within two distinct capitalist social formations. For both Luxemburg and Du Bois, the strike was the phenomenon that fused impersonal historical processes with more immediate forms of political agency, making possible an emancipatory and revolutionary break with the old regime.

I begin by briefly revisiting Luxemburg’s and Du Bois’s respective accounts of the mass strike and the general strike. Following that, I compare their distinct understandings of the strike by focusing on three specific themes. First is the strike’s role in transforming the relationship between collective subjectivity and political agency. Second is how the strike bridges economic and political struggles, fusing them into a single revolutionary political project. Third is the relationship between the strike and social revolution and the place of bourgeois-parliamentary political institutions therein. Along with a number of similarities, this comparison reveals important theoretical differences stemming from their particular standpoints of analysis and political engagements. In particular, Luxemburg neglected the emancipatory character of what Du Bois called the Reconstruction’s “abolition democracy” and its rightful place in the history of nineteenth-century class struggles, because she did not account for the specific articulation of class and race in a settler colonial society. Ultimately, staging this “encounter” with Du Bois allows us to displace her theory of the mass strike beyond its original context and intent. This both expands its scope outside of the original European framework, and, a way that is consistent with their shared Marxist affinities, reflects the unevenness of class subject formation and mobilization in different social formations.

## THE MASS STRIKE AS CONCEPT AND PRACTICE

*The Mass Strike* was first published as a pamphlet in the fall of 1906. This work was a political-strategic intervention within the SPD, with Luxemburg directing her argument against both anarchist and trade unionist understandings of the general strike. Anarchists and syndicalists saw the strike in an ahistorical manner, as something that rested primarily on political imagination and will. On the other hand, trade unionist understandings of the strike that dominated the German social democratic movement saw it merely as an instrumental tactic that should be used sparsely and be entirely subordinated

to the advancement of socialism by parliamentary means. Despite their other differences, both tendencies saw the strike as a “purely technical means of struggle which can be ‘decided’ at pleasure and strictly according to conscience, or ‘forbidden’” by some external leadership (Luxemburg, 2008b: 116).

Against these misunderstandings, Luxemburg drew on the examples of the mass strikes that swept the Russian Empire in the previous year. These events were not a single, homogeneous phenomenon but rather a series of sporadic conflagrations whose roots she traced to the 1896 general strikes in St. Petersburg. The scattered working-class uprisings across the Russian Empire over the following years leading up to the 1905 Revolution fluctuated in their content between “purely” economic and political demands. While their results were mixed, Luxemburg saw these movements as fostering the growth of class consciousness and thus setting the stage for the mass demonstrations of January 1905.<sup>3</sup> The latter combined economic demands for higher wages, shorter working hours, and better working conditions with political demands against the entire system of Tsarist absolutism.

The numerous uprisings across the Russian Empire in the winter of 1905 varied depending on local conditions and the balance of social forces. But the novelty of these events, Luxemburg argued, was that they were neither spurred by a party organization or trade union nor by “revolutionary romanticist” propaganda. The mass strike was not an abstract, schematic tactic that was willed into existence by an outside actor. Nor was it simply a localized response to the peculiar conditions of Russian society that had no bearing on other contexts. Instead, the mass strikes were the concrete manifestations of a “universal form of the proletarian class struggle resulting from the present stage of capitalist development and class relations” (Luxemburg, 2008b: 164). Within the historical trajectory of capitalist development, they were the onset of a “new form of struggle . . . a symptom of a thoroughgoing internal revolution in the relations of the classes and in the conditions of the class struggle” (Luxemburg, 2008b: 118).

These organic awakenings of class consciousness took hold through a politics of proletarian mass action and self-organization. Luxemburg did not frame her analysis in terms of economic necessity or determinacy (Howard, 1977: 50), yet she nevertheless saw the strikes as embedded in a historical process of sedimented class struggles and practices that served as the preconditions for these remarkable uprisings. The mass strike was a “historical phenomenon

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<sup>3</sup> I refer to “consciousness” throughout to capture the positions of Luxemburg and Du Bois. However, my reading of them here is more closely informed by a theory of class composition (Mohandesi, 2013), emphasizing the structural dimensions of class relations and the manner in which classes are materially constituted through concrete practices.

which, at a given moment, results from special conditions with historical inevitability” (Luxemburg, 2008b: 117). The new possibilities and problems introduced by the appearance of the mass strikes on the historical stage could only be understood through an “examination of those factors and social conditions out of which the mass strike grows in the present phase of the class struggle” and the “objective investigation of the sources of the mass strike from the standpoint of what is historically inevitable” (Luxemburg, 2008b: 118).

In *The Mass Strike* and in later texts, Luxemburg extrapolated the more general lessons from these events beyond Russia, particularly as they related to the SPD’s political strategy. Reiterating that the mass strike could not be called into being as a directive from the party leadership, she wrote that it “occurs to some extent automatically, as the natural and inevitable intensification of a mass action which has already begun and is spreading further” (Luxemburg, 1910). It had its own internal rationale and logic of development, being “born of the inner need and of the resoluteness of the aroused masses, and simultaneously of the concentrated political situation” (Ibid). The mass strike was the manifestation of a larger historical process, being “merely the external form of an action which has its own inner development, logic, intensification and consequences” (Ibid). That is, it could be said to express a historical tendency, and also remained partly ungrounded and subject to contingency, ultimately being “both its own justification and the guarantee of its own effectiveness” (Ibid).

In her final political address, given on December 31, 1918, at the founding convention of the German Communist Party (KPD), Luxemburg reiterated the necessity of the mass strike in the midst of the unfolding revolutionary crisis, stating that it was nothing less than “the external form of the struggle for socialism” itself. What had begun as an “exclusively political” revolution was now passing into a new economic phase, prompted by the many spontaneous strikes that marked the onset of the German Revolution. As in her analysis of Russia, here too Luxemburg anticipated that strikes would increasingly become the “central feature and the decisive factors of the revolution, thrusting purely political questions into the background” and intensifying the economic struggle (Luxemburg, 1970: 419–20).

In addition to centering the mass strike as a novel but nevertheless historical and social development, in *The Mass Strike* Luxemburg also reframed the question of political leadership in relation to the class struggle. Again, the mass strike was made possible by historical preconditions, but it was not an artificial method that could be selectively deployed by a revolutionary organization (Luxemburg, 1913). The task of the SPD and the trade unions was not to prepare and announce the mass strikes. Instead, the socialist movement had to draw in and mobilize the unorganized working classes that were the basis of the mass strikes, to provide intellectual and political leadership where

necessary and to agitate with the goal of heightening class consciousness “by making clear to the widest layers of the proletariat the *inevitable advent* of this revolutionary period, the inner *social factors* making for it and the *political consequences* of it” (Luxemburg, 2008b: 161).

Therefore, the mass strike was a point of convergence between historical necessity and political agency. Objectively, it was grounded in the various “political and social proportions of the forces of the revolution [and] the relations of the contending powers” inherited from the past. (Luxemburg, 2008b: 141). Behind it lay not only the accumulated successes and failures of past struggles but also the general historical tendency of capitalist development, with all of its contradictions. In that regard, revolutionary subjects never made history in circumstances fully of their own choosing.

Yet there was also an emancipatory, intersubjective element to the mass strike. Luxemburg called it the very “method of motion of the proletarian mass, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution” (Luxemburg, 2008b: 141). In writing that “the mass strike is merely the form of the revolutionary struggle . . . It is the living pulsebeat of the revolution and at the same time its most powerful driving wheel,” she meant that it did not exist apart from the revolutionary impulse cumulatively generated by the growth of class consciousness (Ibid). The mass strike was the sign that social conditions had reached a point where the working class experienced a sudden and sharp “awakening of class feeling” about the actual social and economic oppressions that it had tolerated for decades (Luxemburg, 2008b: 129). Unlike reactionary mass mobilizations, the proletarian mass strike played a historically progressive role, since it recognized the origins of its political and economic domination as having the same root causes in capitalist exploitation. While this class consciousness arrived suddenly and unpredictably, it was intensified through a positive feedback loop of political practices such as demonstrations, meetings, and public discussions. These dynamic interactions further mobilized the working class, emboldening it to throw off social hierarchies and potentially inaugurate a revolutionary breach. The unique task of Social Democracy in that conjuncture was to channel this newfound revolutionary class consciousness into the political strategy and tactics—party organization and the conquest of political power—that would ultimately facilitate the dictatorship of the proletariat.

### THE BLACK PROLETARIAT AND THE GENERAL STRIKE

Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* came thirty years after Luxemburg’s reflections on the strike. In 1935, with the catastrophes of World War I, the Great

Depression, and the rise of fascism all having taken place in that interregnum, it had indeed seemed that barbarism prevailed over socialism. Undoubtedly influenced by these circumstances, Du Bois had undertaken an intensive study of Marxist thought between 1931 and 1934. It is uncertain if Du Bois had ever read Luxemburg.<sup>4</sup> However, it is well known that during this time he focused on both *Capital* and the *Communist Manifesto*, teaching these works in a graduate seminar on “Karl Marx and the Negro” at Atlanta University in 1933 (Mullen, 2016: 24; Hartman, 2017). *Black Reconstruction* was the culmination of this process, providing a heterodox and original Marxist reinterpretation of the Civil War’s aftermath. Themes of mass praxis, class consciousness, ideology, and contradiction permeate the work (Robinson, 1983: 196). Many of these are captured in Du Bois’s reflections on the “black worker” and the general strike.

While the topic of the general strike takes up only one chapter in the massive *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois pointedly began the book with an account of the figure of the black worker. By designating enslaved persons the black proletariat, Du Bois situated them as the main protagonists in the discussion of the strike. Echoing Luxemburg’s discussion in *The Accumulation of Capital* of how the truly global character of capitalist development required the ongoing exploitation of the underdeveloped periphery, Du Bois (1998a: 5) pushed this argument further, suggesting that, in the final instance, this dynamic rested on the shoulders of the slave:

Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale; new cities were built on the results of black labor, and a new labor problem, involving all white labor, arose both in Europe and America.

The black worker was the linchpin of the south as a contradictory social formation—a seemingly archaic “agrarian feudal” society segmented by both class and racial distinctions, yet also one deeply embedded in a modern *global capitalist* order. This system, where “the capitalist owns not only the nation’s raw material, not only the land, but also the laborer himself,” was both quite distinct from the nascent industrial capitalism of Europe and the northern United States, yet also integral to their flourishing (Du Bois, 1998a:

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<sup>4</sup> Du Bois’s only mention of Luxemburg that I have been able to confirm is a passing reference from his posthumous autobiography, which describes the German Democratic Republic as “developing the faith of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg” (Du Bois, 1968: 23). I owe this detail to Robert W. Williams.

29). At stake in the Civil War was not just question of its survival but also possible expansion.

In the chapter on “The General Strike,” Du Bois honed in on how the outbreak of the Civil War made this structural importance of the black worker apparent, not merely as a bearer of labor power but also as a political subject. While both sides of the conflict treated them as property and ignored their interests, “from the very beginning, the Negro occupied the center of the stage because of very simple physical reasons: the war was in the South,” where nearly 4 million enslaved persons lived (Du Bois, 1998a: 57). Enslaved persons were the fraction of the working class that was essential for the ongoing reproduction of the south’s labor-intensive agrarian social order. This became particularly evident in wartime: “the Southern worker, black and white, held the key to the war; and of the two groups, the black worker raising food and raw materials held an even more strategic place than the white” (Du Bois, 1998a: 63). This put the black worker in a position to cripple the southern economy and war effort, through the withdrawal of their labor power.

As the war dragged on, streams of fugitive and refugee enslaved persons (along with poor white workers) began to abandon their masters’ homes and plantations, expressing a “quiet but unswerving determination of increasing numbers no longer to work on Confederate plantations, and to seek the freedom of the Northern armies” (Du Bois, 1998a: 65). This movement was first cautious and uncertain, driven more by necessity than by any emboldened sense of agency. “The slave entered upon a general strike against slavery by the same methods that he had used during the period of the fugitive slave”—by running away (Du Bois, 1998a: 57). Like the mass strikes described by Luxemburg, this general strike was not initially solicited or organized by the Union army and politicians, who in the early days of the war simply wanted to return the south to the Union, not to interfere with the southern oligarchy’s property. Neither was it an armed insurrection: “The Negroes showed no disposition to strike the one terrible blow which brought black men freedom in Haiti and which in all history has been used by all slaves and justified” (Du Bois, 1998a: 65).

Instead, what Du Bois called the general strike—during which some five hundred thousand black refugees fled the plantations, with many eventually contributing to the Union war effort as either soldiers or now free wage laborers—was a “slow, stubborn mutiny” (Du Bois, 1998a: 80). Once unleashed, the “trickling stream of fugitives swelled to a flood,” becoming a “general strike against the slave system on the part of all who could find opportunity.” The majority of enslaved persons that did stay on the plantations engaged in smaller acts of stalling and sabotage that also helped undercut the Confederate effort. But the significance of the general strike extended beyond a mere refusal to work, or what David Levering Lewis (2001: 372) has called



"little more than the common sense of self-preservation exhibited on a massive scale." As Du Bois wrote, the general strike "was not merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work," involving a more ambitious desire to "stop the economy of the plantation system" altogether (Du Bois, 1998a: 67).

The general strike involved both black and white workers, but it was the black proletariat whose "withdrawal and bestowal of his labor decided the war" (Du Bois, 1998a: 64, 57). Du Bois thus understood the general strike—what Guy Emerson Mount (2015) has called "the most massive slave revolt in the history of the New World"—as a truly unprecedented form of collective action by the most exploited part of the working class.<sup>5</sup> By transferring their labor power from the plantations to the Union war effort by means of the general strike, those newly emancipated set in motion their own structural transformation as political subjects, from enslaved persons to wage laborers (Oakes, 2019). In doing so, they also set in motion a process that, over the following decade, would become the closest American equivalent to a European social revolution.

### PROLETARIAN SUBJECTIVITY AND COLLECTIVE AGENCY

Turning to a comparative reading, it is clear ~~is~~ that both Luxemburg and Du Bois understood the strike as an expression of collective proletarian agency, defined by the concerted withdrawal of labor power by a strategically located class agent within a semi-peripheral social formation. The strike made possible the emergence of a new political subjectivity. The strike, and the revolutionary consciousness it gave rise to, had the power to rupture, if only provisionally, the secular trajectory of capitalist development and to bring about a revolutionary situation.

Luxemburg has occasionally been thought of as theorist of "spontaneity"—a reputation originally attributed to her shortly after her death amidst the ideological struggles within the KPD and the Comintern (Waters, 1970: 9). However, her criticism of anarchist conceptions of the general strike shows this to be an incomplete reading (Howard, 1971: 17). It would be more accurate to say that Luxemburg had a dialectical understanding of the relationship between volition and history, where each conditions the other and cannot be understood in isolation (Geras, 2015: 35–37; Luban, 2019). As Dick Howard (1971: 16) has pointed out, Luxemburg held an understanding

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<sup>5</sup> For the connection between the general strike and past US slave rebellions, see Henderson (2015).

of the proletariat as both the subject and the object of history. As an object, it was the product of the historical dynamics of capitalist development—but as a subject, it had the capacity to become conscious of itself and its historical role, and so to transform the very material conditions that had brought it into existence. Moreover, the mass strike was not a single event, but, as Howard (Luxemburg, 1971: 64) claims, “a *concept*, a totalization, the unity of a variety of actions.” The concept of the mass strike thus captures the nature of revolution as both a totality and a process. As a totality, the strike articulates the contradictions of capitalist development and brings them to a head; as a process, it is an ongoing series of actions and practices through which a collective political subjectivity is formed and cultivated. Altogether, the mass strike *is* the proletarian practice of self-realization as an active class subject. It is the moment at which the proletariat seizes the “role of social subjectivity,” coming to recognize both its economic and political struggles as the results of its own practices (Howard, 1977: 51).

The proletariat’s consciousness of the revolutionary situation figures centrally in Luxemburg’s account of the strike. However, the mass strikes were not at first initiated and conducted by self-consciously revolutionary agents. Luxemburg noted that the strikes broke out with “no predetermined plan, no organized action.” They were not organized by parties or trade unions but instead took place through the “spontaneous risings of the masses” (Luxemburg, 2008b: 128). To succeed, the overthrow of absolutism required “self-consciousness, self-knowledge, and class consciousness” on the part of both the masses and the bourgeoisie. But it could only be achieved through struggle, “in the process of the revolution itself, through the actual school of experience, in collision with the proletariat as well as with one another, in incessant mutual friction” (Luxemburg, 2008b: 130).

A similar pattern of changing subject formation can be observed in Du Bois’s account. The original initiative taken by the black proletariat was tentative, and it was hardly conscious of the role it was playing at that juncture. What is crucial is that the realization of the general strike in *Black Reconstruction* was a learning process, where a new political subjectivity was formed in response to changing structural conditions (O’Donovan, 2015). Du Bois depicted how the black worker “was not seriously considered by the majority of men, North or South” (Du Bois, 1998a: 57). The instrumental treatment of the enslaved persons by both northern and southern whites obscured their real class interests and thus their potential agency. “Any mass movement under such circumstances must materialize slowly and painfully. What the Negro did was to wait, look and listen and try to see where his interest lay” (Du Bois, 1998a: 57). Eventually, this desire for emancipation surfaced via the collective action of the general strike, initiating a material transition from slavery to free wage labor. A collective renouncement of the

previous condition of forced labor allowed the black working class to represent itself as *new kind of labor force*: "the fugitives became organized and formed a great labor force for the army" (Du Bois, 1998a: 65). The general strike catalyzed the change in the black proletariat's collective subjectivity—a process that eventually culminated in the Reconstruction's political and juridical recognition of their personhood as citizens.

From both *The Mass Strike* and *Black Reconstruction*, we can see that Luxemburg and Du Bois share a *process-oriented* understanding of the strike in relation to subject formation. In their conceptions, the strike is an extraordinary form of class struggle that organically gives rise to new, collective forms of political subjectivity. The strike introduces a new form of agency in which both intersubjective collective practices and impersonal historical processes were condensed and channeled. However, they diverge on how revolutionary consciousness and agency could overcome the preexisting fault lines within the proletariat as a social class. This is especially true when it comes to the role of race in the formation of working-class movements, captured in Du Bois's exploration of race in the development of a settler colonial capitalist society.

Luxemburg saw the mass strike as helping forge a new class consciousness that incorporated the broadest segments of the masses. The class movement of the proletariat could not be the "movement of the organized minority. Every real, great class struggle must rest upon the support and cooperation of the widest masses" (Luxemburg, 2008b: 159). Successful mass strikes did not just mobilize those workers already organized into trade unions but morphed into "a real *people's movement*," so that "the widest sections of the proletariat must be drawn into the fight." The mass strike was the expression of "a real revolutionary, determined class action, which will be able to win and draw into the struggle the widest circles of the unorganized workers, according to their mood and conditions" (Luxemburg, 2008b: 159). In *The Mass Strike*, Luxemburg mostly assumed the general convergence of urban working-class interests as the outcome of capitalist industrialization. This was manifested both in her skepticism toward the peasantry as a potentially revolutionary class and in her rejection of national self-determination movements as compatible with proletarian revolution—positions that had put her at odds with Lenin (Davis, 1976). For Luxemburg, the internal tendencies of industrial capitalism toward proletarianization meant that the main hurdle was *organizational*—that is, whether or not revolutionary social democracy could harness and channel the radicalized urban working class, in order to direct it away from the moderate trade union leadership and toward a rupture with the existing order.

For Du Bois, too, social revolution was an organizational matter, in that he was sensitive to how the emancipatory promise of the Reconstruction

depended on the success of political institutions like the Republican Party and the Freedmen's Bureau. However, given the central role that racial consciousness played in upholding the southern order, Du Bois underscored how it was internalized by social subjects and reproduced through social practices—and how it could be used by the capitalist class to drive a wedge within the labor movement. *Black Reconstruction* details how, at the time of emancipation, the American proletariat was divided between recently freed blacks, southern poor whites, northern skilled workers, and northern common laborers (Du Bois, 1998a: 216). Yet the initial solidarity created by the general strike between emancipated persons and poor southern whites was eventually eroded by the maneuvering of both northern industry and southern elites. Fearing a unified, multi-racial working class, northern and southern property-holders converged on “the race element,” using systematic disenfranchisement, exploitation of now-free black labor, and extra-legal paramilitary violence to undercut Reconstruction ~~and install what effectively became a caste system~~. In the context of racial antagonisms between black and white southern workers, and the relative indifference of northern organized labor to the radical Reconstruction project, the promise of Reconstruction's “abolition democracy” was cut short by “war, turmoil, poverty, forced labor and economic rivalry of labor groups” (Du Bois, 1998a: 677).

Under Jim Crow, white and black workers were now pitted against each other. Even strike actions could no longer effectively bridge their new structural positions, as white workers formed racially exclusive trade unions, while black workers were used as strikebreakers. Although attempts were made to recreate the labor solidarity across color lines in the 1880s and 1890s, most notably by the Populist movement, the reaction had already become entrenched in southern political institutions (Du Bois, 1998a: 353; 2007: 154). The dismantling of Reconstruction cemented a lasting racial antagonism between the laboring classes, making “labor unity or labor class-consciousness impossible,” and leading Du Bois to his pessimistic conclusion that “labor can gain in the South no class-consciousness” (Du Bois, 1998a: 680, 704).

## ARTICULATING POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STRUGGLES

More than just initiating the development of revolutionary subjectivity, the strike also fused together economic and political struggles, revealing them to be the dual sides of the same process of capitalist development. In writing about social formations transitioning from “societies with capitalism” to “capitalist societies” (Parisot, 2019: 2), Luxemburg and Du Bois indicated how strike actions could potentially resonate on both political and economic

levels. Both authors suggested that class struggles must pass from political to economic concerns in order to fully realize their revolutionary potential and that strikes are unique forms of working-class actions that can traverse the boundaries between them. However, while both believed that strikes could open a space for the revolutionary transformation of existing social structures, neither presented a linear account of the development from political to economic struggles or vice-versa. Instead, the process depended on the specific social formation and the balance of forces within it—not least of all in what was construed to be “purely” economic or political in such a context and where the demarcation point between the two could be drawn. While being a common global process, capitalist development in the second half of the nineteenth century was ~~simultaneously~~ uneven and contradictory, with the differences among social formations affecting both the forms of political subjectivity and the political and economic struggles in these different contexts. Luxemburg’s and Du Bois’s accounts illustrate how analytic categories and frameworks sometimes resist simple transposal across contexts in their divergence on the issue of capitalism, free labor, and slavery. For while Luxemburg adhered to a more rigid distinction between the economic and the political, the peculiar object of Du Bois’s study suggested the reverse—a fusion of the economic and political domains, represented by enslaved persons’ contradictory positions as unfree workers in a society with capitalism.

Both Luxemburg and Du Bois saw the Civil War as part of the process of capitalist modernization. In *The Accumulation of Capital*, Luxemburg observed that “in the United States, the economic revolution had begun with a war” (Luxemburg, 2003: 396). Like Du Bois, she emphasized that capitalist accumulation occurred through the colonial exploitation of non-capitalist societies. Both authors also acknowledged the extent to which southern cotton production was essential to the English cotton industry—what Luxemburg called “the first genuinely capitalist branch of production.” Yet the similarities end there. For Luxemburg, American slavery was decidedly *not* a capitalist social relation but a “primitive system of exploitation” that was part of the “traditional pre-capitalist organization of production” (Luxemburg, 2003: 343, 339). Thus, it was only after the Civil War that “the millions of African Negroes who were shipped to America to provide the labor power for the plantations” emerged “as a free proletariat [and] were incorporated in the class of wage laborers in a capitalist system” (Luxemburg, 2003: 343).

Moreover, in *The Mass Strike* Luxemburg was preoccupied with Tsarist Russia and Imperial Germany, where the transition to free waged labor was rapidly taking place, and consequently where the separation between the political and economic domains was more pronounced. Accordingly, she adhered to a more classical Marxist understanding of the proletariat, writing in January 1905 that the Russian Revolution had “the most pronounced

working-class character of any modern revolution up to now” (Luxemburg, 2019: 53). Luxemburg focused almost exclusively on the urban working class in major industrial cities, such as St. Petersburg, Odessa, and Baku. This industrial proletariat was the very “soul of the revolution in Russia” because of its ability to bring capitalist production to a standstill through a proliferation of political and economic struggles (Luxemburg, 2008b: 163). The “determined political struggle of the urban workers” would naturally change into an “elementary economic tempest of mass strikes,” which would in turn provide new strength to the political struggle against absolutism (Luxemburg, 2008b: 156). This meant that the mass strike’s fusion of political and economic struggles was largely taking place *after* the process of capitalist industrialization had already initiated their separation into relatively independent domains.

Social democratic strategy in turn of the century Germany was heavily oriented toward parliamentary and trade unionist struggles, thereby being limited to “the form of the bourgeois state, in a representative fashion, by the presence of legislative representation.” The legal and political superstructure of the state perpetuated the separation of social struggles into “separate” political and economic domains—a separation that was merely the “artificial product of the parliamentary period” (Luxemburg, 2008b: 169). In contrast, Luxemburg stressed that the truly *revolutionary* character of the mass strike lay in it expanding the scope of the political beyond the parliamentary state. The strike revealed the real character of the underlying class struggle, where political-legislative and economic-trade unionist struggles were simply two faces of the same phenomenon:

In a revolutionary mass action the political and the economic struggle are one . . . There are not two different class struggles of the working class, an economic and a political one, but only *one* class struggle, which aims at one and the same time at the limitation of capitalist exploitation within bourgeois society, and at the abolition of exploitation together with bourgeois society itself. (Luxemburg, 2008b: 170)

While political and economic struggles could be distinguished in theory, their underlying *phenomenal* unity was in the mass strike, where between the two there was “the most complete reciprocal action.” During the strike, “cause and effect here continually change places; and thus the economic and the political factor in the period of the mass strike . . . merely form the two interlacing sides of the proletarian class struggle in Russia. And *their unity* is precisely the mass strike” (Luxemburg, 2008b: 145). In this sense, as Norman Geras has suggested, Luxemburg was neither an economic determinist nor a political voluntarist but saw the two as complementary aspects of

a single historical tendency that had its overt expression in the mass strike. Like Du Bois's black proletariat, the participants in the mass strikes were not necessarily aware of the *historical* significance of their shift from political to economic demands in the midst of their struggles. Nevertheless, the mass strike's fusion of political and economic demands—and the transformation of collective subjectivity and agency that this enabled—could initiate a crisis that Luxemburg expected to transform the entire social formation of Tsarist Russia.

Whereas Luxemburg's revolutionary subject was the proletariat understood as the industrial working class, Du Bois rejected the notion that this category should be reserved for the class of free, waged laborers in the context of advanced capitalist development. While Du Bois's invocation of the "general strike" and "black proletariat" was controversial among both his contemporary Marxist interlocutors and later scholarship (Lewis, 1998; Parfait, 2009; Kelly, 2015; Glberman, 1995), his stretching of the latter has analytical purchase, capturing the distinctive social structure of the American south as compared to industrial North America and Europe. Although the general strike involved the articulation of both economic and political components, it took place in a settler-colonial social formation, where the metropole and the colonies were not spatially separated, and where agricultural labor mostly had not taken a contractual and waged form. Absent this formal separation of the economic and the political, the social structure of southern agrarian capitalism simultaneously rested on both the economic and political subjugation of enslaved persons.

As a result, the articulation of political and economic struggles represented by the general strike was qualitatively different from the one dealt with by Luxemburg. In the case of the general strike, the shift in the struggles was not from the political to the economic (with a reciprocal effect), but instead, given the structural position of enslaved persons within the south's social formation, was already simultaneously political and economic. As Gayatri Spivak (2014) has pointed out, it was precisely because the black worker was structurally situated at the crux of two distinct forms of capitalism—plantation and industrial—that the notion of the "black proletariat" could capture an expanded sense of collective subaltern agency in an "effort to rethink the revolutionary subject from within slave labor."

Clearly, the general strike undercut the economic foundations of southern society by withdrawing the labor power on which it reproduced itself. Yet the general strike had an equally important *political* dimension due to it taking place in a social formation where the political and economic were entwined. The plantation regime had relegated slavery to the nominally "private" sphere of property relations, thereby denying enslaved persons the ability to claim political rights. Against this order, the strike contested not just coercive labor

practices, but the south's entire *raison d'être* under which enslaved persons were denied the status of citizens in order to perpetuate their character as a specific kind of workforce. In this, the strike was a political act, as an immediate revolt against coercion and subordination, and in a more mediated sense, by forcing emancipation onto the agenda of national, parliamentary politics (the formally "political" terrain of the state.) In short, the general strike undercut the very economic-political structure on which the southern order was ~~entirely~~-based, ultimately helping move emancipation from a legal or constitutional matter to one of social revolution.

### SOCIAL REVOLUTION AND THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Both Luxemburg and Du Bois saw the strike as the catalyst in a transition from an order combining feudal and bourgeois elements, whether Tsarism, Prussian Junkerism, or the plantocracy of the U.S. south (Hahn, 1990), to a democratic-republican regime characterized by parliamentary democracy, universal male suffrage, and the institution of free wage labor. Both also believed that genuine democracy was unattainable within the framework of capitalist social relations and that its fate ultimately depended on a social revolution initiated and conducted by the working class. As a collective agent, the proletariat straddled this divide: it was both the defender of parliamentary democracy against the forces of absolutist or oligarchic reaction and a historically revolutionary force that pushed against the institutional limits of the bourgeois-democratic republic to a more radical economic democracy.

Luxemburg's critiques of both Bernstein's revisionism and aspects of Bolshevik rule have allowed her legacy to be claimed by a number of tendencies on the left (Waters, 1970; Geras, 2015; Howard, 1971; Hudis and Anderson, 2004; O'Kane, 2015). She remained a revolutionary socialist throughout her life, yet one who held a nuanced view of the relationship between parliamentary democracy and proletarian revolution. In *Reform or Revolution*, she maintained that in certain instances the bourgeois republic's reliance on universal male suffrage afforded opportunities for working-class struggles within parliamentary institutions. Taken in isolation, these legal struggles were never sufficient for the revolutionary project: parliamentarism was democratic in form, but it was nevertheless a "specific form of the bourgeois class state" (Luxemburg, 2008a: 65). The proletarian revolution still required a mass, popular rising oriented toward the seizure of political (state) power, the transitional dictatorship of the proletariat, and the destruction of the capitalist state. However, the attainment and defense of various constitutional freedoms through both extra-institutional and electoral struggles



could be seen as part of the prerequisite democratization of the bourgeois-parliamentary state. "Democracy is indispensable to the working class," Luxemburg famously wrote, "because only through the exercise of its democratic rights, in the struggle for democracy, can the proletariat become aware of its class interests and its historic task" (Luxemburg, 2008a: 93). Popular participation within the bourgeois parliamentary state allowed the proletariat to develop its own autonomous administrative organs and assert its electoral rights, providing inroads through which it could cultivate its forces in advance of the ruptural moment where state power could be seized. In other words, these struggles could have both practical and pedagogical effects on the composition of the revolutionary class.

In this scheme, the distinctive radical promise of the Russian Revolution of 1905 was to condense the time horizon between the bourgeois-democratic and proletarian revolutions. Luxemburg saw the mass strike as the most acute expression of the historical overcoming of absolutism, which forced Russia to pass from a stage of capitalist primitive accumulation to industrial capitalism. This had placed it on the track toward the emergence of a bourgeois-parliamentary, constitutional state, and at the same time, of a historically conscious proletariat that would oversee the rapid supersession of this political form. The revolutionary situation in Russia circa 1905–1906 was a moment when "the mass strike appears as the natural means of recruiting the widest proletarian layers for the struggle, as well as being at the same time a means of undermining and overthrowing the old state power and of stemming capitalist exploitation" (Luxemburg, 2008b: 163). In Russia, the equivalent of the European bourgeois revolutions would be carried out by a "modern class-conscious proletariat" (Luxemburg, 2008b: 162). Here, the pedagogical effect of the mass strike was to bring about a new collective agent that could simultaneously champion socialist republican democracy against both absolutism and bourgeois parliamentarianism. The revolutionary potential of the proletariat, with its "equal emphasis on political freedom, the winning of the eight-hour day, and a human standard of material existence," lay in its ability to realize the true potential of what were only formally democratic institutions (Luxemburg, 2008b: 163). Luxemburg thus saw the Revolution of 1905 as the first moment in history where the working class could advance democracy as both a formal *and* a substantive goal (Geras, 2015: 64).

For Luxemburg, the events of 1905 realized in absolutist Russia the "general results of international capitalist development," and therefore appeared "not so much as the last successor of the old bourgeois revolutions as the forerunner of the new series of proletarian revolutions of the West" (Luxemburg, 2008b: 164–65). While Luxemburg did not live long enough to witness the fascist reaction to these attempted revolutions, Du Bois was writing in the midst of that global moment, along with the hindsight of a suppressed social

revolution in his own country that cemented the south as a racial-authoritarian enclave. In that sense, *Black Reconstruction* was an attempt at the historical recovery of a road not taken. Against then-dominant interpretations of Reconstruction as a period of corrupt misrule, he argued that it was a social revolution of a world-historic magnitude: “We are still too blind and infatuated to conceive of the emancipation of the laboring class in half the nation as a revolution comparable to the upheavals in France in the past, and in Russia, Spain, India, and China today” (Du Bois, 1998a: 708). If not strictly speaking a proletarian revolution by the measures of the Communist orthodoxy of Du Bois’s time, it was nevertheless a thorough social transformation, initially catalyzed by the mass action of black workers.

Du Bois saw Reconstruction as a groundbreaking moment, calling it “one of the most extraordinary experiments of Marxism that the world, before the Russian Revolution, had seen” (Du Bois, 1998a: 358). It was an “economic revolution on a mighty scale and with world-wide reverberation,” during which racially integrated proletariat formed a “vast labor movement” that championed both political and economic freedom. Reconstruction presented the possibility of a thorough transformation of the economic, political, and ideological fabric of American society, promising to bring “a democracy which should by universal suffrage establish a dictatorship of the proletariat ending in industrial democracy” (Du Bois, 1998a: 346). As Marx had observed when reflecting on the Civil War, the advancement of a truly democratic republic in North America rested on the freedom of both white *and* black labor. For Du Bois, too, “the true significance of slavery in the United States to the whole social development of America lay in the ultimate relation of slaves to democracy” (Du Bois, 1998a: 13). The strike put black agency and autonomy at the center of what democracy in America could potentially mean, initiating a movement that culminated in the Reconstruction’s radical promise of both political and socioeconomic freedom.

The black proletariat were the limit point at which the institutions of the bourgeois-democratic republic and their promise of formal equality clashed against the radical, emancipatory, and universal project of “abolition democracy.” This was because the emancipation of black workers from their condition of forced servitude raised unavoidable questions about the attainment of legal equality, suffrage, education, and the distribution of both political power and private property. Du Bois understood the project of abolition democracy to entail, *at the minimum*, free wage labor, universal manhood suffrage, land redistribution, and citizenship as full legal equality under the law. But while these demands were in line with those of radical Republicans, like Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner, Du Bois also held a broader vision of abolition democracy as combining the eradication of enslavement with a more ambitious and international working-class struggle. Radical Reconstruction had

the power to form a biracial "dictatorship of labor" that exercised power over both the Northern "dictatorship of capital" and the remnants of the southern oligarchy through a combination of federal state institutions and the exercise of universal male suffrage (Du Bois, 1998a: 219, 239, 345).<sup>6</sup> The latter figured centrally in this vision, for only with this weapon "could the mass of workers begin that economic revolution which would eventually emancipate them" (Du Bois, 1998a: 284). The political overthrow of the plantocracy accomplished by the Civil War was the necessary precondition for a more thorough social revolution that would drastically change the political and institutional balance of class forces.

Emancipation, education, citizenship, rights, and the redistribution of land and capital were the essential elements of this transitional period of working-class rule. In states like South Carolina, Reconstruction-era governments allowed unprecedented forms of *de jure* equality, public education, and political participation for blacks, to the point that Du Bois entertained the idea that this "dictatorship of the proletariat" could have used universal suffrage to expropriate the southern oligarchy and abolish private capital, although he recognized that this course of events did not actually take place.<sup>7</sup> As Eric Foner notes, even if it did not live to see this radical phase, Reconstruction still produced biracial democratic government, social legislation, the creation and expansion of public facilities and schools, the exclusion of the plantocracy from power, and, as a result, the prevention of the replacing of slavery with a similarly coercive form of labor discipline. "If Reconstruction did not create an integrated society, it did establish a standard of equal citizenship and a recognition of blacks' rights to a share of state services" that distinguished it from both slavery and the segregated order that soon followed (Foner, 1990: 179, 159).

However, the balance of social forces following the Civil War ultimately prevented the Reconstruction from passing to this full revolutionary phase—that is, from the political demand for full legal equality and rights to the use of state power for land reform and redistribution of property (Foner, 1990: 162). While "the plantation land should have gone to those who worked it," entailing a massive redistribution of land that would have definitively broken the forces of reaction, northern capitalist interests abandoned the Reconstruction

<sup>6</sup> Also noteworthy is what Kevin Bruyneel (2017) calls the "constitutive presence and absence of Indigeneity and settler colonialism" in *Black Reconstruction*, in that the emancipatory potential of the Reconstruction era was partially made possible and conditioned by the ongoing dispossession of Native Americans.

<sup>7</sup> See Du Bois's footnote in *Black Reconstruction*, p. 381, where he suggests that Reconstruction "presents an opportunity to study inductively the Marxian theory of the state." It is worth mentioning that in at least one instance Luxemburg did not reject peaceful expropriation. In *Reform or Revolution* (Luxemburg, 2008a: 64) she left open the possibility of buying out the property of the landlord class after the power had shifted into the hands of the workers.

project—and with it black workers—while the remnants of the southern elites successfully exploited racial fissures between poor whites and blacks (Du Bois, 1998a: 673). The “counter-revolution of property” between 1872 and 1876 saw the rise of violence and intimidation, disenfranchisement through “‘crime’ peonage,” and punitive labor laws (Du Bois, 2007: 151–52). In this way, the American equivalent of nineteenth-century European working-class movements for democracy was preemptively and brutally cut short.

The project of abolition democracy advanced emancipatory political demands to the utmost institutional limit of the democratic republican form. Similar to Luxemburg’s view that the mass strike was a necessary moment in the proletariat’s historical passage beyond the democratic republic, Du Bois’s account treats the general strike as the precondition for the attempted introduction of a republican regime in the American south that could then facilitate a more radical social transformation. This makes it unfortunate that Luxemburg did not turn her attention to Reconstruction. Had she done so, she would have recognized its proximate goals of free wage labor, universal manhood suffrage, and juridical equality as necessary components of future class struggles in the new political order of the U.S. south. Yet she would also likely see them as insufficient for the revolutionary supersession of capitalism. This is because while she was an original and insightful observer of the role played by imperialism and uneven development in the reproduction of the world capitalist system, her doubts that revolutionary struggles within that system could be refracted through the prisms of race and nationality likely kept her from fully grasping the significance of Reconstruction. Given this oversight, the emancipation of black workers and the attempted Reconstruction of the south along the lines of abolition democracy undoubtedly deserve a place alongside the revolutions of 1789, 1848, 1905, and 1917 in her periodization of the foundational modern class struggles.

### **CONCLUSION: LUXEMBURG AND DU BOIS IN THE ENCOUNTER**

Rosa Luxemburg’s reflections on the mass strike remain among the most distinctive contributions to twentieth-century Marxist thought. However, when reading her alongside a Marxist internationalist contemporary like Du Bois, one who was situated in a different vantage point and approached the relationship between capitalist development and social transformation accordingly, we can note both affinities and divergences in their understandings of the strike and its significance for revolutionary politics. Capitalist development entails certain universal, structural tendencies of class formation, capital

accumulation, and class struggle. Yet these processes vary across social formations, often involving parallel and contemporary trajectories that are at the same time distinct and uneven.

Both authors understood the strike as a process that generated a new collective subjectivity, fused political and economic struggles into a unified revolutionary project, and made it possible for the working class to initiate a transition up to and beyond the democratic republic. Both were also acutely concerned with how collective agency and history mutually conditioned each other. For them, the strike was a moment that marked the emergence of a new revolutionary working-class subject and the inflection point where the historical tendencies of capitalist development could be made to come under the sway of its collective agency. The strike created the revolutionary conditions under which the barriers that normally separated political and economic struggles broke down and were replaced by new articulations of collective action. These, in turn, could accelerate the transition to the bourgeois-parliamentary republic, and beyond that, to generate the heightened working-class consciousness to push this regime to its limit. Yet insofar as Luxemburg understood the proletariat exclusively through the lens of the European industrial working class, she overlooked the characteristics of the antebellum south as a *modern*, not pre-capitalist, social formation: namely, its role as one of the main nodal points of the nineteenth-century capitalist world system and its peculiar class fragmentation along racial lines. As Du Bois perceptively noted, any hope of bringing into being a revolutionary subject in this kind of social structure required an expanded conception of the proletariat—one that captured the distinct position of black workers as a class fraction and foregrounded how racial barriers could undercut working-class unity. Luxemburg’s relative indifference to the latter prevented her from recognizing Reconstruction as an attempted social revolution and a crucial moment in the history of nineteenth-century class struggles.

Together, Luxemburg’s and Du Bois’s analyses illustrate how differences in social formations affect class struggles and the processes of subject formation. Yet placing Luxemburg’s account of the strike alongside Du Bois’s is more than just a comparative study of the interactions between history and structure. It also “defamiliarizes” Luxemburg from her original context and adapts her ideas to a set of different challenges that were beyond her original framework. By channeling Marxist categories through the lens of the settler-colonial social formation, Du Bois reworked these theoretical tools to tackle the question of what working-class emancipation could mean—not just in the legacy of colonial race relations but equally importantly when exploring the global consequences of race and racism for international working-class struggles in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Given her unwavering commitment

to proletarian internationalism, situating Luxemburg's account alongside Du Bois's thus confronts it with an increasingly pertinent problem that, tragically, she did not live to see. By amending Luxemburg's analysis through this encounter, we emphasize the original power of her insights, yet also show that they were parts of an unfinished and ongoing project of understanding the conditions and possibilities of social revolution and emancipation.

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