

LUXEMBURG'S CAPITAL ACCUMULATION AND IMPERIALISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR NEOCOLONIAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The 20th century was a turning point against colonialism and imperialism, as movements ranging from revolutionary violence to nonviolent resistance and cultural revivals mobilized across the globe to dismantle foreign domination. Rosa Luxemburg was one of the intellectual figures who articulated critiques of the empire. This paper explores the relevance of Luxemburg's theory of imperialism as a structural consequence of capitalist accumulation and its relevance for the analysis of contemporary neocolonialism and her extension of Marx's concept of primitive accumulation as an ongoing process that persists beyond formal decolonization. Her critique of nationalism and bourgeois-led independence movements is examined to show how political sovereignty can coexist with continued economic subordination, a condition central to neocolonial arrangements. The paper also examines her view on the viability of proletarian internationalism and mass action as the only counter to the imperialist-capitalist system. By applying Luxemburg's insights to contemporary global inequalities and transnational capitalism, the paper demonstrates the continued analytical value of her thought for understanding neocolonial power relations and the limits of nationalist and reformist responses.

Keywords: Luxemburg, Capitalist Accumulation, Nationalism, Transnational Capitalism, Neocolonialism

INTRODUCTION

The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy defines colonialism as a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another.¹ It is a political and economic enterprise and a civilizational project that reshaped identities, ethics, and global structures. As a driver of expansion and consolidation of power, it is the basis of large imperial structures. The 20th century witnessed a global surge in anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements of oppressed people against foreign domination. These movements were not uniform in ideology or method. They ranged from armed struggles and Marxist revolutions to mass nonviolent mobilizations and cultural renaissances. Within this broad spectrum of resistance, intellectuals and activists developed differing theories of liberation. Frantz Fanon emphasized the psychological and cultural trauma of colonialism, advocating for cathartic revolutionary violence. Others like Aimé Césaire or Amílcar Cabral grounded anti-imperialism in a recovery of identity and collective memory. Major revolutions from the Bolshevik Revolution to the Chinese and Cuban revolutions linked anti-colonialism with Marxist class struggle, arguing that imperialism was the global extension of capitalism. Among those that rose against colonial and imperial domination, Rosa Luxemburg was one. A Marxist revolutionary and theorist of global capitalism, she approached colonialism through a structuralist lens, seeing it as an outgrowth of capitalist accumulation to be dismantled through class struggle and proletarian internationalism. In an age of continued neocolonial dynamics, a critical analysis of her perspectives helps provide a systemic lens in studying anti colonial efforts.

¹ Kohn, Margaret, and Kavita Reddy. "Colonialism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Last modified June 19, 2023. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/>

LUXEMBURG'S CRITIQUES OF IMPERIALISM

Rosa Luxemburg was a Polish-Jewish anti-war activist who was also a prominent figure in early 20th-century Marxist political philosophy. Luxemburg saw imperialism as a structural outgrowth of capitalism. Her theory framed colonialism as a necessary and inevitable phase in the evolution of global capitalist expansion and not just a policy of choice for certain nation states. Unlike moralist or nationalist critiques of empire, Luxemburg's analysis was structural in the sense that for her, imperialism is inseparable from the logic of capital accumulation.

Luxemburg's most detailed explanation of imperialism appears in her magnum opus, *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913). Here, she challenges orthodox Marxist views by arguing that capitalism cannot sustain itself purely through internal production and consumption. According to Luxemburg², imperialism is driven by the 'deep and fundamental antagonism between the capacity to consume and the capacity to produce in a capitalist society, a conflict resulting from the very accumulation of capital which periodically bursts out in crises and spurs capital on to a continual extension of the market.' Luxemburg states capitalism requires external, non-capitalist environments, i.e., pre-capitalist societies, colonies, or "undeveloped" territories to gain raw materials and absorb surplus goods, labour, and capital.³

Thus, imperialism is not merely the political domination of one country over another but an economic necessity for capital to perpetuate itself. Colonized nations are drawn into the capitalist system not because they are passive victims but because capitalism must absorb and or transform non-capitalist ways of life to survive. Imperialism, then, is capitalism's strategy for overcoming its own contradictions.

Luxemburg links imperial expansion to what Marx termed "primitive accumulation", the violent process of dispossession that precedes capitalist production. She expands this concept by arguing that primitive accumulation is not a one-time event but an ongoing process. In colonized regions, this manifests in the destruction of indigenous economies, forced labour systems, land appropriation, and the imposition of European legal and political systems.

*"Capital increasingly employs militarism for implementing a foreign and colonial policy to get hold of the non-capitalist countries and societies."*⁴ For Luxemburg, the colonial project is thus systematically violent and extractive. Colonialism is rooted in the insatiable and inevitable economic hunger of capital itself. Her critique situates colonialism within a global matrix of exploitation. Resisting colonialism is inseparable from resisting capitalism as imperialism is seen as a necessary extension of capitalism. As such, anti-imperialism cannot rest on moral appeals or national independence alone and must aim for structural transformation on a global scale.

Luxemburg viewed the First World War as a war between imperialist powers that revealed the collapse of bourgeois liberalism and parliamentary democracy under pressure. *"It (Social Democracy) has wiped itself out completely as a class party with a world conception of its own, has delivered the country, without a word of protest, to the fate of imperialist war without, to the dictatorship of the sword within."*⁵

² Luxemburg, Rosa. *The Accumulation of Capital*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951 [1913].

³ Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*.

⁴ Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*.p.466

⁵ Luxemburg, Rosa. *The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis of German Social Democracy*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969 [1915].

In the first chapter of the *Junius Pamphlet* of 1915, she wrote:

“The triumph of imperialism leads to the annihilation of civilization. ...either the triumph of imperialism and the collapse of all civilization as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, ...Or the victory of socialism, that means the conscious active struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism and its method of war.”⁶

This internationalist orientation makes Luxemburg a foundational figure in critiques of classical colonialism and modern forms of neocolonialism, debt imperialism, and global inequality. Her insistence that socialism must be global or not at all remains a focus for radicals confronting today's interconnected power systems.

Luxemburg's structuralism also shaped her reservation toward nationalist movements in colonized regions. While she supported the right to self-determination in principle, she feared that bourgeois-led nationalist movements would only replace colonial rulers with domestic elites without transforming the underlying capitalist structures. In her analysis of Polish nationalism and the movements in the Balkans, she warned that national independence could become a tool for new forms of exploitation unless paired with socialist revolution.

“true class interest of the bourgeoisie, is state independence. The nation-state is also simultaneously that indispensable historical form in which the bourgeoisie passes over from the national defensive to an offensive position, from protection and concentration of its own nationality to political conquest and domination over other nationalities. Without exception, all of today's “nation-states” fit this description, annexing neighbours or colonies, and completely oppressing the conquered nationalities.”⁷

Luxemburg's analysis of militarism and national chauvinism saw war not only as a geopolitical strategy but also as a means for internal control such as the disciplining of the working class, promoting national unity, and justifying the erosion of civil liberties. Her opposition to war, especially conscription and mass mobilization, directly confronted the proto-fascist glorification of martial sacrifice and national purity.

In the *Junius Pamphlet* Chapter 7, 1915, she writes:

“Is an invasion really the horror of all horrors, before which all class conflict within the country must subside as though spellbound by some supernatural witchcraft? ...on the contrary, it is a measure to which the bourgeoisie has frequently and gladly resorted as an effective weapon against the enemy within?”⁸

This assertion, a radical denunciation of nationalism, contrasts with the nation-state's glorification.

INTERNATIONALISM AS THE CURE TO THE IMPERIALIST-CAPITALIST SYSTEM

Luxemburg saw proletarian internationalism as the essential counter to the imperialist-capitalist system and insisted that the proletariat had no nation and that international solidarity was the only viable path toward true liberation.

⁶ Luxemburg, *The Junius Pamphlet*.

⁷ Luxemburg, Rosa. “The National Question.” In *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, edited by Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, 125–165. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004 [1909].

⁸ Luxemburg, *The Junius Pamphlet*

In the Junius Pamphlet, Chapter 2:

*“Up to this time, we have cherished the belief that the interests of the peoples of all nations, that the class interests of the proletariat are a harmonious unit, that they are identical, that they cannot possibly come into conflict with one another. That was the basis of our theory and practice, the soul of our agitation.”*⁹

Luxemburg argues that this innate nature of capitalism necessitates imperialist expansion and violent conquest, making war not an accident of foreign policy but a structural feature of late capitalism. Resisting this system requires the working class to reject both nationalist ideology and reformist compromise. Only through international proletarian solidarity, in shared class interests rather than national affiliation, could workers resist being mobilized in service of capitalist wars and colonial exploitation. This principle became even more urgent during World War I, which Luxemburg condemned in *The Junius Pamphlet* (1915) as an imperialist slaughter supported by the betrayal of socialist parties who subordinated internationalism to national loyalty. For Luxemburg, the revolutionary potential of the working class can only be realized through coordinated international struggle. The path to socialism lay in the collective uprising of workers across borders, uniting against the global logic of capital. Proletarian internationalism was the *only* way the working class could overcome the systemic violence, inequality, and crises generated by capitalist imperialism^{10 11}. Her often-cited maxim, “socialism or barbarism”¹² encapsulates this choice: internationalist revolution or continued descent into war, exploitation, and social collapse.

VIEWS ON MASS ACTION

Central to Luxemburg’s political vision is the role of the masses in revolutionary change. She elevates the spontaneous actions of workers as crucial drivers of history. Rather than waiting for perfect conditions or a vanguard party to guide the revolution, she emphasizes that real change arises from collective resistance in response to systemic crisis.¹³

Luxemburg instead insists that only the international working class, through revolutionary praxis, can dismantle the imperialist-capitalist system. She asserts that dismantling the imperialist-capitalist system cannot be achieved through gradual reform or nationalistic movements, but through the conscious and collective action of the international working class engaged in revolutionary praxis. Imperialism is an inherent outcome of its expansionist logic: capital must continuously seek new markets, resources, and labour to sustain profitability. As such, attempts to combat imperialism without confronting capitalism are fundamentally inadequate.

Luxemburg emphasizes the necessity of mass political struggle, rooted in class consciousness and international solidarity. As the primary victim of capitalist exploitation and the only class with the structural capacity to overthrow it, the working class must engage in organized, revolutionary action

⁹ Luxemburg, *The Junius Pamphlet*

¹⁰ Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*.

¹¹ Luxemburg, Rosa. *The Accumulation of Capital: An Anti-Critique*. Translated by Nicholas Gray. London: Routledge, 2003 [1915].

¹² Luxemburg, *The Junius Pamphlet*.

¹³ Luxemburg, Rosa. *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1914 [1906].

that goes beyond national borders. Only through this global, collective transformation can the twin structures of capitalism and imperialism be dismantled. She rejected nationalist or reformist approaches that left the capitalist foundations intact, emphasizing the necessity of global solidarity and class consciousness instead.

CONCLUSION: LUXEMBURG AND THE STUDY OF NEOCOLONIALISM

Rosa Luxemburg's analysis of colonialism and imperialism offers a structural framework that remains relevant for understanding contemporary forms of domination. By placing imperialism within the internal contradictions of capitalism, Luxemburg shifts the discussion outside of morality or historical specificity and reveals colonialism as a systemic recurring feature of capitalist expansion. Her view of imperialism as a necessity of accumulation allows to examine colonialism and its modern variants as parts of global economic structures rather than the past era of formal empire.

Although direct colonial political rule has largely ended, formerly colonized societies remain integrated into unequal global systems through debt regimes, multinational corporations, trade dependency, financial institutions, and resource extraction. Luxemburg's argument that capitalism constantly requires non-capitalist spaces to absorb surplus capital helps explain why global inequalities persist despite political independence. Neocolonial domination operates through economic pressure, structural adjustment, development discourse, and militarized security interventions rather than overt colonial governance, but the underlying logic remains the same. Luxemburg's scepticism toward nationalist solutions and her view that national independence without socialist transformation may simply replace foreign rulers with domestic elites parallels the postcolonial context where local bourgeoisies collaborate with global capital. This helps explain why political sovereignty has not necessarily translated into economic autonomy or social justice. In studying neocolonialism, Luxemburg's framework encourages critical attention to class relations within postcolonial states, rather than treating the nation as a unified victim of external forces. Finally, Luxemburg's emphasis on internationalism and mass action offers a strategic dimension to the anti-neocolonial critique as resistance confined within national boundaries is insufficient against a global system of capital. In the world of transnational supply chains, financialization, and global labour exploitation, the angle of international working-class solidarity provides a lens to analyse contemporary movements against corporate imperialism and global inequality.

Luxemburg's thought remains a vital resource for studying neocolonialism because it connects historical colonialism with present-day global capitalism, exposes the limits of nationalist and reformist approaches, and discusses the need for structural and international solutions to enduring forms of imperial domination.

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