106 imagining and living the revolution: an Arendtian reading of Rosa Luxemburg's letters and writings

Maria Tamboukou

abstract

In this paper, I look into personal and political entanglements in Rosa Luxemburg's letters and essays revolving around questions and problems of the revolution. The analysis is informed by Hannah Arendt's theorisation of revolutions in modernity, as well as her reading of narratives within the political. What is intriguing about the Luxemburg/Arendt encounter is the fact that although both theorists consciously refused to connect themselves with feminist ideas and movements of their times and geographies, their writings have inspired a rich body of feminist theorisations of the political. What I argue is that Luxemburg's ideas and lived experiences of the revolution largely inspired Arendt's theorisation of the revolution as a political phenomenon in the pursuit of freedom, and are opening up new vistas in our understanding of gendered dynamics in historical and contemporary revolutionary events.

keywords

Arendt; Luxemburg; entanglements; letters; revolution; the political

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[Berlin] [19 April 1899]

> Dyodyo! Finally I've got a free minute—I sent out the proofs and am exhausted—too tired to sleep. I have to write you now. For a long time I've wanted, actually needed, to tell you something, but there hasn't been a second!!
>
> Do you know what I've been feeling very strongly? Something is moving inside me and wants to come out. It's something intellectual, something I must write. Don't worry, it's not poetry again or fiction. No, my treasure, it's in my brain that I feel something. I feel I haven't used a tenth or a hundredth part of my powers. I'm not happy with what I've been writing and absolutely and clearly know I can do much better work. In other words, as Heinrich says, I need to 'say something important'.
>
> It's the form of my writing that no longer satisfies me. In my 'soul' a totally new, original form is ripening that ignores all rules and conventions. It breaks them by the power of ideas and strong conviction. I want to affect people like a clap of thunder, to inflame their minds not by speechifying but with the breadth of my vision, the strength of my conviction and the power of my expression.
>
> How? What? Where? I still don't know.
>
> Laugh to your heart's content, I don't care. I'm convinced that something is stirring inside me, something is being born [...] Rózia.
>
> Leipzig got 600 copies of 'Social Reform or Revolution' already. Three thousand will sell quickly, and I'll request royalties for the second edition [...]. (RL to LJ, in Ettinger, 1979: 75–76)

On 19 April 1899, Rosa Luxemburg wrote a letter to her comrade and lover Leo Jogiches,[1] expressing strong forces of power and desire that were 'moving inside' her. 'I'm convinced that something is stirring inside me, something is being born', she wrote, employing birth as a metaphor for emergent ideas. Luxemburg's conviction that 'something is being born' strongly reverberates with her desire for a real baby in a letter she wrote on 6 March 1899, just a day after her twenty-eighth birthday: 'and perhaps even a little, a very little baby? Will this never be allowed? Never?' (RL to LJ, in Ettinger, 1979: 73). Birth as a real-life event or as a metaphor was clearly a concern for Luxemburg in the Spring of 1899. But her personal and passionate concerns about babies and new ideas were tightly entangled with her political writings around the revolution in the same period. Interestingly enough, the postscript of her April letter above refers to the publication success of her famous essay 'Reform or Revolution' (Luxemburg, 1899), an eloquent and persuasive attack on Bernstein's (1961) theories on *Evolutionary Socialism*, that was influential in establishing Luxemburg's standing and reputation as a revolutionary intellectual in German socialist circles.

Taking Luxemburg's long-life correspondence to Jogiches as the archive of my enquiries,[2] in this paper I want to discuss questions around women and the revolution by looking into personal and political entanglements in the writings of an influential revolutionary figure of the twentieth century. Since Luxemburg never considered or presented herself as a feminist, despite her close personal and

1 Luxemburg and Jogiches met in Zurich in 1890 and their stormy relationship lasted till 1907, although they continued their political work together till their murder in 1919. For a discussion of their life and work together, see Ettinger (1979, 1982) and Nettl (1966).

2 My analysis draws on edited and translated collections of Luxemburg's letters, including Cedar and Cedar (1923), Ettinger

(1979) and Adler, Hudis and Laschitza (2011). As I have discussed elsewhere (Tamboukou, 2010), there are epistemological limitations that edited collections of letters impose upon the analysis.

political relationship with Clara Zetkin,[3] her writings can both illuminate and complicate gendered investigations into questions of revolutions and their discontents. As Zetkin (1919: np) wrote in a moving posthumous essay, eight months after Luxemburg's murder: 'Socialism was for Rosa Luxemburg a dominating passion, which absorbed her whole life, a passion at once intellectual and ethical [...] Her greatest joy, her dream, was to live to see the revolution, to take her share in its struggles'.

Luxemburg did not live to see the revolution she had so passionately fought for; she was murdered while fighting for it. Moreover, her socialist comrades never forgot her critique of the Russian Revolution and tried to erase her legacy from the history of European socialism. As an effect of a fierce campaign of oblivion that followed Luxemburg's death, much of her work has remained unavailable to English-speaking readers, including 90 per cent of her total correspondence (see Hudis, 2011: viii).

And yet, Luxemburg keeps returning as an inspiring revolutionary figure: 'Luxemburg's legend—vague, confused, inaccurate in nearly all details—could spread throughout the world and come to life whenever a "New Left" sprang into being', Arendt (1968: 37) wrote in the wake of the 1968 students' movement in Europe and the United States. 'We live in revolutionary times. I cannot imagine now what it would have been like to be thinking about Rosa Luxemburg if the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya had not taken place. I do not know whether it would have been easier or more difficult', Rose (2011: 5) emphatically noted in her review article of the latest publication of Luxemburg's letters (Adler, Hudis and Laschitza, 2011). Rose's critical comment forcefully shows that Luxemburg's ideas create specific conditions of possibility within which we can rethink questions and problems of the revolution in the light of the Arab spring uprisings. In agreement with Rose, what I also suggest in this paper is that Arendt's thought offers a useful theoretical lens through which we can understand questions and problems around the revolution, particularly focusing on the battlefield of gender/power relations and women's crucial, but also precarious, position in contemporary revolutionary events.

In making connections between Luxemburg and Arendt, I follow genealogical lines in the thought of two influential women political thinkers, through a diffractive mode of analysis, 'a methodological approach ... of reading insights through one another in attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter' (Barad, 2007: 71). What I suggest is that Luxemburg's political writings as well as her lived experiences of the revolution largely inspired Arendt's theorisation of the revolution as a spontaneous catalytic event, an open political phenomenon, which unleashes unpredictable forces and unfolds through a continuum of eruptions and contradictions in the pursuit of freedom, through the constitution of a new body politic. Arendt's (1998 [1958]) ideas about the force of narratives in fleshing out the political dimension of the

3 Clara Zetkin (1857–1933) was a German socialist feminist, who lived a revolutionary and unconventional life on all fronts (see Badia, 1993).

human condition illuminate Luxemburg's personal writings and particularly her letters as traces of personal and political entanglements that create conditions of possibility for revolution to emerge as a force of and for life, an Arendtian 'love of the world' (Young-Bruehl, 1982).

In further reading two influential women theorists through one another, I highlight the importance of considering the difference that sexual difference makes in how politics and the revolution are experienced, enacted and theorised. Here I discuss the paradox that although both Luxemburg and Arendt did not include gender as an analytical category in their work and refused to be identified as feminists, their writings, ideas and practices have become influential in feminist theorisations of the political.

What I finally argue is that Arendt's encounter with Luxemburg opens up a theoretical plane wherein we can rethink the revolution as a political assemblage of events entangled within the web of human relations and life forces. It is within such a reconceptualisation that we can write feminist genealogies of women's involvement in the revolutions of modernity, unveiling gender-blind discourses, ideologies and practices that are still dominant in how power/gender relations are enacted, negotiated and resisted within current revolutionary events.

writing the revolution

'Revolutions are the only political events that confront us with the problem of beginning', Arendt (1990 [1963]: 21) has argued. Imagining new beginnings and perhaps more importantly enacting them are at the heart of Arendt's theorisation of the revolutions in modernity. What is important to note here is Arendt's twofold conceptualisation of the revolution: (a) as a radical beginning erupting from the web of human relations and (b) as initiation of a political process that will eventually create a new body politic for the foundation of freedom. But Arendt's configuration of the revolution as delineated above very much draws on and is influenced by Luxemburg's political and personal writings, as I will further discuss.

Beginning is indeed a crucial concept in Arendt's (1990 [1963]: 211) theoretical configuration of the human condition: 'Men are equipped for the logically paradoxical task of making a new beginning because they themselves are new beginnings and hence beginners, the very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth'. Existentially inherent in the human condition, the notion of beginning further shapes Arendt's (1994: 321) understanding of the political, an arena where new beginnings are always possible: 'the essence of all, and in particular of political action is to make a new beginning'. As widely noted and discussed (see Cavarero, 2000), natality marks Arendt's philosophy as a radical departure from the

Heideggerian orientation towards death and founds her philosophy of and for life, a point I will return to later on in the paper. But what I want to add in this body of literature is that we can draw interesting parallels between Arendt's notion of the beginning as eruption of the new and a philosophical tradition wherein 'the event' has been theorised as something that makes new things happen, disturbing the order of what we do, the certainty of how we perceive the world and ourselves (see Tamboukou, 2010: 16). It is in the context of 'the event' that Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 177) have argued that 'the success of a revolution resides only in itself, precisely in the vibrations, clinches and openings it gave to men and women at the moment of its making'.

New beginnings are thus constitutive elements of the revolutions in modernity for Arendt. But there is more: 'the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning should coincide [and this is] crucial to any understanding of revolution', Arendt (1990 [1963]: 29) has suggested. We should remember here that freedom is ontologically inherent in Arendt's (2006 [1961]: 166) configuration of the human condition: 'Because he [sic] *is* a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same'. Arendt (1990 [1963]: 29), however, makes an important distinction between liberation and freedom, two notions that are usually confused and conflated in our conceptual and political vocabularies: 'liberation may be the condition of freedom but by no means leads automatically to it', she notes. Despite their incommensurability, the boundaries between the desire for liberation and the desire for freedom are porous and blurring: 'it is frequently very difficult to say where the mere desire for liberation, to be free from oppression, ends, and the desire for freedom as the political way of life begins', Arendt (1990 [1963]: 33) aptly observes. Freedom for Arendt (1990 [1963]: 35) is thus conceptualised as both negative and positive, and it is in this context that she situates the revolutions in modernity, arguing that 'the revolutionary spirit of the last centuries, that is the eagerness to liberate and to build a new house where freedom can dwell, is unprecedented and unequalled in all prior history'. What we are presented with in this succinct statement is a spatial configuration of the weak link of all modern revolutions: the difficulty and historical failure not of liberation from oppression, but of building 'a new house' for freedom, without which oppression has ultimately re-emerged in different political and social regimes of power.

What is also particularly important in Arendt's (1990 [1963]: 37) discussion of modern revolutions as political events is the lucid observation that 'the revolutionary pathos of an entirely new beginning was born only in the course of the event itself'. It is in the political spaces of togetherness that political actors appear to each other and act in concert, in what Arendt (1968: 31) calls the 'interspace'. In Arendt's thought then, revolutions erupt as events and then unfold as political processes; they are what I want to call 'politicogenetic' phenomena, open processes rather than closed historical facts.[4] It is because they demand and depend on the constant presence of political actors that revolutions have

4 Here I draw on Elias's (2000) concept of

historically failed whenever the latter were excluded, or even worse persecuted. Here it is important to note that political actors for Arendt are reborn in action: 'they do not act because of what they already are' (Honig, 1992: 219); they rather become who they are in the process of acting and speaking together. Moreover, they never really inhabit a unitary and stable identity, except in the stories that are told and written about them. Storytelling is very much at the heart of Arendt's conceptualisation of the political, a point I will return to later on in the paper.

'sociogenesis' as a continuous process of social becomings.

In configuring eruption and political action as two crucial components of the revolutions in modernity, Arendt (1990 [1963]: 65) has cited Lenin's condensed definition of the October revolution: 'electrification plus *soviets*'. Arendt's emphasis on the importance of the *soviets* as the new body politic of the revolution brings us to Luxemburg's 1918 essay on *The Russian Revolution*, which Arendt meticulously studied in the 1950s, while preparing for her critique of Marxism in *The Human Condition* and later on for her book *On Revolution* (see Young-Bruehl, 1982: 294).

Luxemburg's influence upon Arendt's political thought has been noted and extensively discussed. As her biographer has written, Arendt was 11 years old 'when her mother took her to the Königsberg demonstrations in support of the Spartacists' (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 124).[5] What she did not know then was that her future husband Heinrich Blücher—20 years old at the time—was among the young Spartacists demonstrating against the First World War. Arendt (1968: 37) had thus heard a lot of anecdotal stories about Luxembourg, not only through the social democratic circles that her mother was involved in, but also later in life from Blücher himself, who had read and admired Luxemburg's political writings. Blücher's visceral memories of the Spartacist group, as well as the lived experiences of the failure of the 'German October of 1923',[6] had ignited Arendt's interest in Luxemburg's political writings and more particularly in her firm conviction that the revolution would be spontaneous, while its strategies and tactics would unfold in action rather than through any centralised party direction. Here she studiously followed Luxemburg's analysis of the 1917 revolution:

> The Russian Revolution has but confirmed the basic lesson of every great revolution, the law of its being, which decrees: either the revolution must advance at a rapid, stormy, resolute tempo [...] or it is quite soon thrown backward behind its feeble point of departure and suppressed by counter-revolution. To stand still [...] is never possible in revolution. (Luxemburg, 1918: 287)

While acknowledging the important role that the Bolshevik party played in driving the revolution ahead, Luxemburg was harshly critical of its later tactics to curtail freedom. For Luxemburg, as for Arendt, the political project of the revolution should be to build 'a house for freedom'. Luxemburg was not unaware of the restrictions and limitations of liberal democracy; after all, she was writing while imprisoned for her activities against a war that the German Social Democratic Party

5 The Spartacus League was an underground political organisation that Luxemburg and Jogiches established in 1914. For discussions of the group, see Nettl (1966), Ettinger (1982) and Adler, Hudis and Laschitza (2011).

6 The 'German October' started as a violent uprising, but it was quickly crushed. For a discussion of Blücher's involvement, see Young-Bruehl, 1982: 127–129.

had endorsed. Nevertheless, she could not agree with the historical necessity of suspending freedom for the sake of the revolution:

> To be sure, every democratic institution has its limits and shortcomings [...] But the remedy which Trotsky and Lenin have found, the elimination of democracy as such, is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure; for it stops up the very living source from which alone can come correction of all the innate shortcomings of social institutions. That source is the active, untrammeled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people. (Luxemburg, 1918: 302)

Luxemburg was fully aware of the difficulties all revolutions had historically faced in founding and supporting a new body politic. In imagining a new socialist system, however, she was adamant that it could only emerge through a historical process wherein the people were actively involved in dealing with problems and finding solutions by acting and speaking together. As Arendt has pointed out, it was through her involvement in the 1905 Russian revolution and her work with the revolutionary workers' councils that Luxemburg (1906: 182) learnt that revolutionary action depends on political education, which 'cannot be fulfilled by pamphlets and leaflets, but only by the living political school, by the fight and in the fight, in the continuous course of the revolution'. Luxemburg's (1918: 306) ideas were thus critically influential upon Arendt's conceptualisation of revolutions as 'politicogenetic phenomena', dependent on collective participation and action: 'the socialist system of society should only be, and can only be, an historical product, born out of the school of its own experiences, born in the course of its realisation, as a result of the developments of living history'.

Revolutionary praxis was an ongoing process for Luxemburg, a living organism through which freedom would be founded in the new body politic of socialism. Like Arendt later on, Luxemburg was fully convinced that public life and direct democracy were *sine qua non* conditions for freedom, the only guarantee that corruption and bureaucracy would not prevail. The role of the revolutionary councils, the soviets, was crucial in realising direct democratic practices and it was important for Luxemburg that they should not become party mouthpieces:

> Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. Public life gradually falls asleep [...] a dictatorship, to be sure, not the dictatorship of the proletariat but only the dictatorship of a handful of politicians, that is a dictatorship in the bourgeois sense. (Luxemburg, 1918: 307)

Luxemburg's forceful statement above is fully cited in a lengthy footnote of Arendt's (1990 [1963]: 328) book *On Revolution*. Indeed, Arendt (1990 [1963]: 264) has meticulously discussed the importance of the revolutionary councils as 'spaces of freedom [that] refused to regard themselves as temporary organs of

revolution and on the contrary made all attempts at establishing themselves as permanent organs of government'. Although these attempts were unsuccessful—as the histories of the 1848 Paris commune, as well as the 1905 and 1917 Russian revolutions, have most poignantly shown—they did create a historical precedent, a model of revolutionary praxis to be emulated in the future: 'this Hungarian struggle is something of which Kant would say: "It will not let itself be forgotten". It will have consequences', Arendt wrote to Karl Jaspers on the aftermath of the Hungarian revolution (HA to KJ in Arendt and Jaspers, 1993: 304). Kant's insightful observation that the French revolution should not be evaluated in terms of its immediate effects, or its possible success or failure, but rather in terms of its aura in enacting memories of revolt and hopes for a different future, thus constituting a historical event that 'can never be forgotten' (Kant, 1798: 184), brings us full circle to Luxemburg's letters to Jogiches, and it is the epistolary modalities of living through and writing about the revolution that I will discuss next.

living the revolution

Luxemburg wrote *The Russian Revolution* in 1918 while she was still in prison and had no intention to publish it (see Arendt, 1968: 54). After her murder, however, Paul Levi published it in 1921, and this opened up the doors of hell for Luxemburg and her followers. But while the anti-Luxemburg campaign was in full swing in the politics of Soviet Russia and the European communist parties, the publication of her prison letters created 'an event' that was to break the silence and oblivion that had followed her murder (Cedar and Cedar, 1923). Arendt (1968: 36) has argued that the poetic beauty of these letters was catalytic in destroying 'the propaganda image of bloodthirsty *Red Rosa*'. But these letters also gave rise to a similarly problematic discourse of Luxemburg as 'a bird-watcher and lover of flowers, a woman whose guards said good-by to her with tears in their eyes when she left prison' (Arendt, 1968: 36–37). Legends and myths notwithstanding, Arendt immersed herself in the poetic beauty of Luxemburg's letters, unsurprisingly so, given her overall interest in narratives.

As already noted above, narratives are at the heart of how Arendt conceptualises the human condition: as the only tangible traces of the human existence, stories evade theoretical abstractions and contribute to the search for meaning by revealing multiple perspectives while remaining open and attentive to the unexpected, the unthought-of. In doing so, stories ultimately reconfigure the sphere of politics as an open plane of horizontal connections, wherein the revolution can once again be re-imagined. In this light, Luxemburg's epistolary narratives made a forceful intervention in the politics of their time, bringing to the fore passionate entanglements in the dark planet of the personal and the political. How is the revolution to be perceived and sensed within these entanglements? This is what I want to discuss in this section.

The two small volumes of Luxemburg's letters that Arendt so admired were letters written from prison between 1916 and 1918 to Sophie Liebknecht, wife of Karl Liebknecht, who was also imprisoned in the same period and was ultimately murdered alongside Luxemburg, in January 1919. In these letters, Luxemburg's epistolary art transposes the personal character of her prison letters into purely poetic writing, lines that illuminate the bleakness of the Now of the writer and the addressee and offer glimpses into imagined open futures:

> I feel how you are suffering because the years are passing beyond recall without your being able really to 'live'! Have patience, and take courage! We shall live none the less, shall live through great experiences. What we are now witnessing is the submergence of the old world, day by day another fragment sinks beneath the waters. (RL to SL, 12/5/1918, in Cedar and Cedar, 1923: 69)

The literary beauty of the epistolary extract above eloquently expresses Luxemburg's political optimism, her conviction that while the old world sinks something new is about to come, a new beginning to occur. Indeed, contradictions and failures were interwoven in Luxemburg's (1906: 182) understanding of the revolutionary process: 'the various undercurrents of the social process of the revolution cross one another, check one another, and increase the internal contradictions of the revolution, but in the end accelerate and thereby render still more violent its eruptions', she wrote. Moreover, the rhetorical art of Luxemburg's prison letter above was not an exception. The whole corpus of her extant letters are artful entanglements of personal thoughts, intense feelings and succinct political views, whether she was writing to chastise her lover for neglecting their relationship, to ask his advice for a political piece she was writing or to point out weaknesses in their political strategies and tactics. Throughout her letters to Jogiches, Luxemburg was constantly demanding that they should talk about the daily minutiae of their lives, their feelings, thoughts and emotions alongside their organisational problems and publishing projects. Her consistent complaint was that his letters never revealed anything about how he felt: 'When I open your letters and see six sheets covered with debates about the Polish Socialist Party and not a single word about [...] ordinary life, I feel faint' (in Ettinger, 1979: xv). But why was 'ordinary life' so important for Luxemburg's politics and why did she feel that 'it was a radical failure of politics not to be in touch with the deepest parts of the self', as Rose (2011: 16) has suggested? Luxemburg's idea of politics and the revolution was a politics of and for life, an immanent force that could only effect change, as long as it was and remained worldly. In her philosophy, human beings needed each other to develop and realise themselves, and it was the role of politics to create conditions of possibility for human communication, creativity and action. As she wrote to Jogiches on 3 July 1900:

> How badly I need you! How badly we need each other! [...] The two of us constantly 'live' and [sic] inner life. It means we keep changing [...] therefore the inner self must be constantly

> reexamined, readjusted, harmonized [...] But in order not to lose the overall sense of existence that I believe is a life committed outward, constructive action, creative work, one needs the control of another human being. That human being must be close, understanding and yet separate from the 'I' that seeks harmony. (RL to LJ, in Ettinger, 1979: 105)

Luxemburg's relational ontology is thus entangled with the politics of 'love for the world' (Young-Bruehl, 1982), a theme that runs like a red thread throughout Arendt's work, from the philosophical explorations of her doctoral thesis on the Augustinian notion of love to her late political writings. This is where Luxemburg's letters become so important, opening up vistas in understanding the self of a revolutionary woman inhabiting a range of diverse and contradictory spaces and subject positions. Through the narrative force of her letters, Luxemburg emerges as a woman whose passion and love for the world are inextricably interwoven with her political activities. As Rose (2011: 8) has insightfully put it, her correspondence should not be read 'as the sole repository of intimacy, but because it shows the ceaseless traffic between the personal and political'. But this mode of mingling the personal and the political was not always well received or understood even by her closest correspondents.

Misread and misunderstood as they often were, Luxemburg's letters reveal how conscious she was that politics is always situated, embodied and embedded. When in disagreement with Jogiches, she would not hesitate to point out that his social class was shaping flaws and inconsistencies in his political views: 'I don't agree with you about the factory commissions. You silly jackass, what you lack is "class" instinct; from excessive radicalism you slipped straight into opportunism' (RL to LJ, in Ettinger, 1979: 142). Moreover, Luxemburg's letters carry traces of how macro-politics were entangled with intense agonistic politics of the self, as in the letter below written on 10 October 1905, under the influence of the February revolution in Russia:

> It tears me apart that it's so hard for me to write [...] Only under unusual circumstances like when I get all excited (as when I started L[eioziger] V[olkszeitung]), or during the February revolution is my pen 'winged'. And when I am sweating out an article, I feel so discouraged, I can't even write a decent letter and feel like hiding in a dark corner. (RL to LJ, in Ettinger, 1979: 148)

The epistolary extract above forcefully shows that even for a brilliant theorist and political activist like Luxemburg, writing was a struggle, directly affected by the critical political events of her time: the revolution would inspire her ideas and 'wing her pen', although the struggle of political writing would also strain her emotional ability to write 'a decent letter'. Both modes of writing were important for Luxemburg but always in tension with each other. Her letter of 20 October 1905 dramatically enacts the agonistic milieu within which she lived, acted and wrote:

> Dear! This is in a hurry because I just got your letter with comments [...] and at once got down to work to send it back by return mail, and let you breathe freely. I included all your comments except for two [...]

> Yesterday by a strange coincidence I took out a box with mother's and father's last letters [...] I read them through and cried until my eyes were swollen, and I went to bed, wishing I'd never wake up. I cursed the damn 'politics' that stopped me from answering father's and mother's letters for weeks on end. I never had time for them because of those world-shaking problems (and still nothing has changed) [...] Today I took a walk in the sun and I feel slightly better. Yesterday I was almost ready to give up, once and for all, the goddamn politics (or rather the bloody parody of our 'political' life) and let the whole world go to hell. (RL to LJ, in Ettinger, 1979: 152)

Luxemburg's letter above expresses the intensity of her political work but also emits signs of ambivalence and uncertainty: it reveals the vulnerability of being human, but it also shows that it is only through an ethics of care that a project of revolutionary politics can ever be realised. As Rose (2011: 6) has suggested, uncertainty lies at the heart of Luxemburg's idea of the political; it is 'the thread that runs through her unwavering belief in democracy and freedom, as well as in socialism [...] it is the link in her life and thought between the public world of politics and the intimacies of the mind'. It is no wonder that the letter above was written in the same year as her important essay 'The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions', where she elaborates her ideas about the unpredictability, uncertainty and spontaneity of the world revolutions, by reflecting on her lived experiences of the 1905 uprising:

> During the revolution it is extremely difficult for any directing organ of the proletarian movement to foresee and to calculate which occasions and factors can lead to explosions and which cannot [...] the element of spontaneity plays a great part [...] revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them. (Luxemburg, 1906: 198)

Unlike Arendt, Luxemburg both lived and wrote about the revolution, and despite her doubts she never abandoned politics. As Rose (2011: 11) has pithily noted, 'failure never diminished Luxemburg's faith [...] it has to be seen, not as the enemy, but as the fully-fledged partner of any viable politics'. Despite her lifelong commitment to political action, however, Luxemburg was constantly critical of the dryness and tragedies of politics and life, a sensitivity that was conditioned, albeit not determined, by the fact that she was a woman, as I will further discuss.

women and the revolution

> The struggles of our demand for women must be bound up with the object of seizing power, of establishing the proletarian dictatorship .... The women must be made conscious of the political connection between our demands and their own suffering, needs and wishes. (Lenin to Zetkin, in Mannin, 1939, front page)

In 1939, Ethel Mannin used an extract from Zetkin's reminiscences of her discussions with Lenin on the 'women's question'[7] as a frontpiece for her book *Women and the Revolution*. Interestingly enough, this book was dedicated to Emma

7 See Zetkin, C. (1920) 'Lenin on the women's

Goldman: 'This book is dedicated to you, since you have done me the honour of accepting the dedication, because your whole life has been dedicated to the revolutionary cause, and because you are the greatest living woman revolutionary', Mannin (1939: front pages) wrote. What is further intriguing in Mannin's lengthy acknowledgement is the need to highlight the paradox of dedicating a book 'which quotes from Marx and Lenin [to] an anarchist'. Mannin's struggle at the very beginning of her book on *Women and the Revolution* strikingly highlights the historical continuity of women's both passionate and uneasy relation to revolutions, an issue that has preoccupied feminist theorisations of the political (see Butler and Scott, 1992).

question', *http://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1925/lenin/zetkin2.htm*, last accessed 24 November 2012.

In the context of this rich body of feminist scholarship, Scott (1996) has theorised the recurrent struggle of having *Only Paradoxes to Offer* in the history of feminism in general and French feminists' relation to the French Revolution in particular: 'This paradox—the need both to accept *and* to refuse "sexual difference"—was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history' (Scott, 1996: 3–4). What I would add to Scott's influential theorisation of the historical paradoxes of feminism is a line of women, like Luxemburg and Arendt, who consciously refused to identify themselves with the feminist movements of their time and did not speak or write on behalf of women, although they analysed women's condition in their theoretical and political writings. The paradox I have identified in this genealogical line of 'non-feminist' political theorists is that their writings, ideas and practices were deeply influenced and formed by the sexual difference they so persistently considered as irrelevant to the aims and directions of the revolution. For Arendt, sexual difference was a given and, as Honig (1995: 1) has remarked, 'she believed strongly that feminism's concerns with gender, identity and sexuality were politically inappropriate'. This did not stop her from writing her secondary doctoral thesis on *Rahel Varnhagen*, exploring issues of Jewish acculturation through the close examination of a Jewish woman's personal letters (Arendt, 1957). Luxemburg (1914: 239) was mostly interested in women workers' oppression and resistance, and although she wrote about women's suffrage she was clear that 'the mass movement to bring it about is not a job for women alone, but is a common class concern for women and men of the proletariat'. She also believed that working women's movements should be independent of the middle-class women's associations (see Luxemburg, 1914).

In her most recent book *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, Scott (2012: 5) has invited us to reconsider the role of fantasy in the making of feminist history: 'it is fantasy that undermines any notion of psychic immutability or fixed identity, that infuses rational motives with unquenchable desire, that contributes to the actions and events we narrate as history'. Without abandoning her previous analyses of gender as a discursive construct, Scott conceptualises gender as 'a historically and culturally specific attempt to resolve the dilemmas of sexual difference, to assign fixed meaning to that which ultimately cannot be fixed' (*ibid.*: 5). In this context,

she has configured two fantasy figures: 'the female orator and the feminist maternal' (*ibid.*: 54). The figure of the revolutionary woman 'standing at the podium, giving a speech' (*ibid.*: 55), while later on executed by her former comrades, has set in motion processes of phantasmatic identifications, operating 'as a fantasy echo, replaying in time and over generations the process that forms individuals as social and political actors' (*ibid.*: 54).

In this wave of 'fantasy echoes', Luxemburg was discursively constructed as 'the blood-thirsty Red Rosa' for the reactionary circles (Arendt, 1968: 36) or 'nothing less than a syphilis bacillus' (*ibid.*: 55) for her communist comrades, while later on as the mythical figure 'of the bird watcher and lover of flowers' (*ibid.*: 36–37). Even when Luxemburg's legacy was recovered in the wake of the European social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, 'there survived also the old clichés, of the "quarrelsome female", a "romantic" who was neither "realistic" nor scientific', Arendt has pithily noted (*ibid.*: 37).

Sexual difference, either acknowledged or ignored, has thus played a crucial role in the fantasies of social and political movements such as feminism or socialism, and it is within these entanglements and discursive limitations that the figure of the revolutionary woman has emerged. Furthermore, revolutionary women have historically struggled for their analyses to be accepted as politically and/or academically valid and rigorous. Even when such rare exceptions were made, as in the case of Luxemburg, their personal entanglements would be cleared out of their work. When in 1982 Elżbieta Ettinger wrote Luxemburg's biography drawing on her love letters to Jogiches, her approach was defiantly criticised: 'it is both pathetic and ironic to see the famous Marxist revolutionary writing to her love, "I've two vases with violets on the table and a pink lampshade … and new gloves, and a new hairbrush and I am pretty" ' (cited in Dabakis, 1988: 20). Ettinger has thus been criticised for allowing 'a rosy' or maybe 'violet' Rosa to emerge, a vulnerable woman who liked pink lampshades and wanted 'a little baby', while writing and fighting for the revolution. But it is exactly these unthought-of conjunctions—the lamp as an aesthetic sign of the desire for a good life, the baby as an Arendtian new beginning and the revolution as a political event encompassing the desire for rupture, renewal and therefore the revolution—that Luxemburg's letters leave traces of.

Although a line of revolutionary women have consciously and consistently differentiated themselves from the feminist movements of their time, they have at the same time developed loving friendships with famous feminist women. Luxemburg's lifelong relationship with Zetkin is just one exemplary case among many. Feminists on the other hand have politically identified themselves with and affectionately attached themselves to revolutionary women irrespective of their ideas *vis-à-vis* feminism. It was thanks to Zetkin among other comrades that Luxemburg's letters were archived, saved and published (see Adler, Hudis and Laschitza, 2011: xxiv–xxv) and it is to Goldman that Mannin boldly decided to dedicate her book.

Revolutionary women have inspired feminists and have invoked imaginaries in the making of feminist history. What feminists have offered to revolutionary women apart from their friendship and love is the political will to listen to their stories, and in an Arendtian way insert them in the discourse of History in the form of narratives.

diffractive readings: narratives, gendered politics and the revolution

In this paper, I have considered entanglements between women and the revolution through an Arendtian reading of Luxemburg's personal and political writings. Although Arendt was the first to thematise entanglements between politics and storytelling, her intervention has, however, remained largely unnoticed and it is relatively recently that her contribution to the narrative/politics and/or personal/political field of enquiries and research has been revisited and reassessed within feminism and beyond (see Honig, 1995; Cavarero, 2000; Guaraldo, 2001). In a similar vein of ignoring or marginalising women's political and theoretical contribution, Luxemburg's ideas about the revolution have been distorted, while her personal writings and mostly her letters have remained inaccessible or have been considered irrelevant to her political thought.

In thus thinking diffractively between Luxemburg and Arendt, I have put forward the argument that we need to write feminist genealogies of women's visceral involvement in the revolutions of modernity. Such genealogical investigations excavate discourses and practices that have historically revolved around revolutionary events, as well as women's role in them. As histories of the present (see Foucault, 1986 [1971]), feminist genealogies can also illuminate current revolutionary events, including women's position in the forefront of the Arab spring uprisings, as well as the controversies that their revolutionary presence has ignited among their comrades and beyond. In this light, what I have argued is that Arendt's understanding of the revolution as both eruption and initiation of a new body politic, largely inspired by Luxemburg's political analyses, is a useful theoretical framework that can help us understand fierce gender/power relations at play in the post-revolutionary regimes of the Arab spring uprisings. Freedom can only be realised in a plural public space, where people act in concert, Arendt (1998 [1958]) has famously argued. Having decidedly participated in the revolutionary events that have disrupted long-standing oppressive political regimes, women of the Arab spring are now heavily involved in the struggle for freedom through the route of founding new body politics, as well as negotiating their position within them.[8]

If revolutions erupt as events, but then unfold as 'politicogenetic phenomena', it is women's entanglement in current revolutionary processes that we, as feminists, should not lose sight of, by supporting and sustaining the Arendtian

8 See Kandiyoti, D. (2013), 'Fear and Fury: women and post-revolutionary violence', *Open Democracy, http://www.opendemocracy*

.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/fear-and-fury-women-and-post-revolutionary-violence, last accessed 21 March 2013.

public sphere of agonistic politics through words and deeds, narration and action. It is here that Luxemburg's and Arendt's ideas of the revolution become so crucial and timely.

author biography

Maria Tamboukou (BA, MA, PhD) is Professor of Feminist Studies and co-director of the Centre for Narrative Research, University of East London, UK. Her research activity develops in the areas of critical feminisms, auto/biographical narratives and Foucauldian and Deleuzian analytics. Writing feminist genealogies is the central focus of her work. She is currently working with epistolary narratives on love and agonistic politics and on a genealogy of the seamstress.

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