

Rosa Luxemburg's Notes on Ancient Athens and the Slave Mode of Production

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Introduction: Revolutionary Socialism and the Question of Athenian Democracy

We would like to begin by thanking everyone who has worked to organize the 21st annual Historical Materialism conference here in London. With the (re)election of president Donald Trump in the United States this week, we must confront the spectre of American fascism. Last night, while we were reviewing our talk at the Crown Tavern, we asked ourselves if this is time to discuss the Marxist interpretation of ancient Greek history. To put it bluntly, what does the question of slavery in Athens nearly 3,000 years ago have to do with what we face today? Our answer is this. If we believe that socialism in Germany from 1900 to 1919 is important for our understanding of modern fascism, then it is important to understand the role ancient history played in the work of Rosa Luxemburg. The political writings, speeches, and economic theory she produced between 1900 and 1918 are essential reading for anyone who desires to understand the great -isms of the 20th and 21st century: capitalism, socialism, fascism. Less studied, however, is the foundational role ancient history played in her interpretation of Marxist economic theory. When Rosa Luxemburg taught night courses in political economy for the working classes in Berlin between 1907-1914, she stated: 'Everything that exists today is bound up with the ancient Greek world, with Aristotle. In this sense we could even say: without slavery, there would be no socialism.' Why is everything today bound up with the ancient Greek world? What were the workers of Berlin expected to learn about the struggle for liberation from Aristotle - the philosopher who gave the world the theory of natural slavery? In the limited time we have today, we will try to provide Rosa Luxemburg's answer to these questions.¹

¹In 1951, the Classical scholar of ancient history, M.I. Finley stated that since the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*, ancient slavery had 'been a battleground between Marxists and non-Marxists,' Finley 1959, p. 160. For Marx's early statements on Greco-Roman history, *MECW* 3, p.31; *MECW* 3, p.71; *MECW* 3, pp.197-199; *MECW* 3, p.312; *MECW* 4, p.114. Since 1968, the ground has mostly been ceded to non-Marxist scholarship. The topic has slowly faded from Marxists accounts to the period. See Anderson 1974; de Ste. Croix 1981; Garlan 1987; Meiksins Wood 1989; Rose 2013. Meiksins Wood even contends slavery simply did not exist in agricultural production. See Lewis 2018, pp. 181-188 for a critique of Wood's argument and a summary of the debate in the last 70 years. We have summarized the scholarship on the demographic estimates of slavery in Appendix I. See García Mac Gaw 2015 and 2019 for a corrective look at the importance of slavery and the argument that the tributary mode of production resolves some long



Figure 1: SPD Party School 1907

To do this we must recall the debates at the beginning of the 20th century within the German Socialist Party (SPD). In *Social Reform or Revolution?* Luxemburg explains the disagreement between the two factions of the party over the meaning of democracy:

To bourgeois theoreticians of liberalism, democracy is the great fundamental law of historical development, the realisation of which is served by all the forces of political life... We reach entirely different conclusions when we examine the historical development of democracy a little closer and consider, at the same time, the general political history of capitalism. *Democracy has been found in the most dissimilar social formations: in primitive communist groups, in the slave states of antiquity and in medieval communes.*²

According to Luxemburg, when the reformists distilled history down to the inevitability of liberal democracy- the facile belief that ‘democracy is an inevitable stage in the development of society’ - they effaced the conflict endemic to modern democracy. Furthermore, they blinded themselves to the material contradiction inherent in modern capitalist democracy: the irresolvable conflict between capitalism and the power

standing questions.

²Emphasis added. Luxemburg 2008 [1908], pp. 85-86.

of the people.³ To Luxemburg, the reformists made a simple mistake: they misread the spirit of democracy for its real manifestation, socialism. She followed in the footsteps of Marx and Engels who articulated the same concern in *The Holy Family*:

Robespierre, Saint-Just and their party fell *because they confused the ancient, realistic-democratic commonwealth based on real slavery with the modern spiritualistic-democratic representative state*, which is based on emancipated slavery, bourgeois society... What a terrible illusion it is to have to recognise and sanction in the rights of man modern bourgeois society, the society of industry, of universal competition, of private interest freely pursuing its aims, of anarchy, of self-estranged natural and spiritual individuality, and at the same time to want afterwards to annul the manifestations of the life of this society in particular individuals and simultaneously to want to model the political head of that society in the manner of antiquity.⁴

According to Marx, the French revolution failed *because* the revolution confused ancient, real democracy with the modern, spiritual democratic-republic. So Luxemburg too wrote, 'the great men of the French Revolution... promised humanity a paradise on earth, in which freedom, equality and fraternity would rule.'⁵ This, in short, is the spirit of modern ideology.⁶ It is the spiritual illusion that the modern nation-state is the fulfillment of the liberal ideal of antiquity.⁷ The spirit dominates intellectual life in Europe in the late 18th century, and it was captured by Thomas Paine's 1791 declaration that 'What Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude.'⁸ Every modern nation-state at one point dreamed of itself as a new Athens. Lord Byron, the Romantic poet who gave his life to the Greek War of Independence, gave voice to this vision when he wrote, 'I dream'd that Greece might still be free; For standing on the Persian's grave, I could not deem myself a slave.'⁹ For Luxemburg, however, this was all 'an absurd and ineffable contradiction.'¹⁰ Our metaphors of democracy do

³On the question, see Tudor 1988. At the heart of the debate was the question of slavery. Comparative history, according to the reformist, Bernstein, revealed the 'civilizing' force of capitalist expansion and colonialism. Rosa Luxemburg's comparative ethnology was a steadfast refusal of the view Bernstein expresses in these debates. See Anderson 2002 for Marx's critique of colonialism, multilinear perspective in the later editions of *Capital*, and the development of his ethnographic studies and views of early communism.

⁴Emphasis added. *MECW* 4, p. 122

⁵*CWRL* 1, p. 258

⁶*MECW* 3, p. 31: 'In the states of antiquity the political state makes up the content of the state to the exclusion of the other spheres. The modern state is a compromise between the political and the unpolitical state.' Also, *MECW* 3, 197-199: 'Where political parties exist, each party sees the root of every evil in the fact that instead of itself an opposing party stands at the helm of the state. Even radical and revolutionary politicians seek the root of the evil not in the essential nature of the state, but in a definite state form, which they wish to replace by a different state form.'

⁷See Hegel 1975 [1837] p. 103, who uses Athena as an example of the spirit of the nation *qua* the individual: 'Athena... has a double significance; she is the city of Athens itself in its totality, and the goddess as the spirit by which this totality is animated... This spiritual being is his being [the individual]... he arises out of it and exists within it.'

⁸Paine 2012 [1791]

⁹'Isles of Greece' (1821)

¹⁰*CWRL* 2, pp.438-441: The words are Rodbertus' and she cites them in agreement: 'There is an absurd and ineffable contradiction,' he exclaims, 'in the conception of those economists who would grant the

not liberate us from the conditions of capitalism any more than Byron's poetry freed Greece from the Bavarian monarch, King Otto.¹¹ The metaphor only served to efface the central question of modern democracy: who labors and who is free?

Today, in the limited time available, we will outline her reading of ancient Greek slavery. Three essential works have been made available together in English for the first time with Verso's 2013 publication of *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg: Volume I*. The fragmentary *Introduction to Political Economy*, *Slavery*, and *Notes About the Economic Form of Antiquity/Slavery* provide Luxemburg's analysis of the development of Athenian democracy. 'When we examine the historical development of democracy a little closer,' we find there are three periods of democracy in ancient Greece:

- (1) The Village Commune
- (2) Tributary Domination
- (3) The Slave Mode of Production

We will look quickly at each period in turn, stressing in particular her unique focus on (a.) the village stage of early agricultural communism and (b.) external domination as the cause of ancient state development.

1 Prehistoric Democracy: Village Communism

When and where did democracy begin?¹² For the Enlightenment revolutionaries and the Romantic poets, Classical Athens was born *ex nihilo*. For Rosa Luxemburg, however, the 'history of the antique Greeks and Romans' began with 'the kinship ties of the ancient communist village communities.'¹³ Like Engles, she contends that historical materialism begins with the study of kinship.¹⁴ Her method of history is founded on the philosophy of labor she defends in *Back to Adam Smith!*¹⁵ We have discussed this in full in a paper presented in Istanbul. For now, let us state what we understand to be her essential methodological assumptions: (a) The Social Organization of Labor, (b) The Means of Production, (c) Domination.¹⁶ Luxemburg

workers civil rights to participate in decisions over the fate of society, and would at the same time have these same workers, from an economic point of view, treated as mere commodities!' She shares this part of his critique, but begins to discuss the implications and the irony of his reform position: 'Now only the question remains as to why the workers acquiesce to such an absurd and flagrant injustice...' In part, the answer is their lack of historical knowledge of slavery.

¹¹He arrived on a British warship in 1832 and ruled until 1862.

¹²The purpose in this article is to present Luxemburg's ideas and not to bury them in the bibliographical debates of 20th and 21st century Marxism. For a discussion of the debate and bibliography on the pre-capitalist modes of production, see da Graca and Zingarelli 2015 and Godelier 1970. For those inclined to write off any discussion of early communism on the grounds of Marx's eurocentrism, see Anderson 2002, Foster 2020, and Leacock 1972.

¹³CWRL 1, PAGE.

¹⁴Engles 2001 [1888], pp. 94-161.

¹⁵CWRL 1, pp. 79-89

¹⁶See our forthcoming paper 'Writing Rosa Luxemburg Back into the History of Greco-Roman Economic Theory.'

was aware of the ethical dangers inherent in the epistemological problems of comparative ethnology and history. Her method was grounded by her commitment to the abstraction of labor, which she argued stood between the relativism of German historicism which posited no canon of historical comparison and the science of Austrian economics which offered no defense for its universalization of subjective value. For Luxemburg, like Marx and Engels, the work of Henry L. Morgan revealed pre-capitalist forms of the social organization labor which were fundamentally different from that which capitalism portrays as natural.¹⁷ In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels begins his explanation of the rise of ancient Greece from the kinship system Morgan observed in the Iroquois federation.¹⁸ Rosa Luxemburg's starting point, however, is different. Influenced by the work of Maurer's 'epoch-making work' on the early Germanic societies that practiced common land ownership and labor organization, she began with the 'ancient communist village.' Like Marx, whose late ethnographic studies on the communist village were unknown to her,¹⁹ she bases her work not only on the English, German, and Russian village society but also on the indigenous communities around the world.

In the opening chapter of *The Accumulation of Capital*, 'The Problem of Reproduction,' she provides a concise description of village communism:

In a primitive communist agrarian community, reproduction, along with the whole planning of economic life is determined by all those who work and by their democratic organs: their decision to resume labor, its organization, the provision of its necessary conditions (raw materials, tools, and labor-power) - in sum, the determination of the scale of reproduction and its division - are the result of the planned cooperation of the whole community within its borders.²⁰

This, Luxemburg theorizes, is the first form of democracy in Greece. As she writes in *The Introduction to Political Economy*, 'It is nothing other than the communism of land and soil, that is to say, the common possession of the most important means of production by those who work.' A recent work, *The Pre-History of Private Property*, which reviews the evidence for communal property in stateless farming societies, agrees with the general picture presented. They describe the agricultural common property system in the following terms:

The land-tenure and 'property' systems that indigenous stateless farmers set up around the world over the last 12,000 years have been extremely diverse, but all, that we know of, are distinct from the modern conception of full liberal ownership.... Private property systems are not inherent to

¹⁷CWRL 1, p. 162: On 'Morgan's achievement,' 'Primitive communism, with the democracy and social equality that went together with it, were thereby shown to be the cradle of social development. By this expansion of the horizon of the prehistoric past, he showed the whole present-day civilization, with private property, class rule, male supremacy, state compulsion and compulsory marriage, as simply a brief transitory phase...'

¹⁸Engels 2001 [1888], pp. 162-170.

¹⁹See Anderson 2002

²⁰CWRL 2, p. 8.

agricultural societies. Quite the opposite; private property systems are extremely unusual and perhaps non-existent among people using agricultural techniques similar to those of early farmers.²¹

They continue:

Virtually all the small-scale agricultural villages that dominated the world in the 1400s practiced some system of communal land tenure irrespective of the political system in which they were involved... Observed autonomous villages tend to have little economic inequality, no explicit fixed rules, and virtually no trade or specialization. Archaeological evidence of peoples of the deep past living at this scale indicates that they were similar in these respects. They usually have no fixed property rights in land; all members of the village are entitled to access to land...²²

This confirms the point Luxemburg wished to stress: private property, as defined by Marx, simply did not exist in the overwhelming majority of pre-capitalist societies.²³ Rosa Luxemburg understood the evidence for pre-capitalist forms of social organization as a condemnation of the colonial attempt to naturalize private property and capital's ruthless extirpation of indigenous communities around the world. As she saw it, 'From the mid-nineteenth century, therefore, to the 1870s, a wealth of material came to light that eroded and soon tore to shreds the old idea of the eternal character of private property and its existence from the beginning of the world.'²⁴ Contemporary archaeology confirms the existence of small-scale farming societies in the region. We know today that farming societies arrived in Greece around 6,500 BC. The best documented region is northern Greece in the area of Thessaly. More than 113 sites have been discovered in this area alone. They were generally restricted to a territory of about 2.5 hectares of land and a population of 100 to 300 people. Despite the many questions that have yet to be resolved in neolithic studies, a few facts are established: (1) a group of people from the area of Anatolia, who brought the culture of farming from the Levant arrived in Greece in 6,500 BC., (2) DNA studies have established that Early Anatolian Farmers (inappropriately often categorized as Early European Farmers) continue to represent a very high proportion of the population through every major period of Greek history, including today, and (3) they share

²¹Widerquist and McCall 2021, p. 220.

²²Widerquist and McCall 2021, p. 235.

²³See *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy* (1857) MECW 28, pp. 399-439 for a similar definition of private property in antiquity. In particular, see pp. 419-420: 'Property ...ancient [classical] therefore originally means the relation of the working (producing) subject (or the subject reproducing himself) to the conditions of his production or reproduction as his own. Hence it will take different forms depending on the conditions of production... The object of production itself is to reproduce the producer and together with these objective conditions of his being. This relation as a proprietor not as the result but as the presupposition of labour, i.e. of production presupposes in turn a particular existence of the individual as member of a tribal or communal entity (whose property he himself is up to a certain point). Slavery, serfdom, etc., where the labourer himself appears among the natural conditions of production for a third individual or community...'

²⁴Luxemburg 2013, 156. Also, p. 146: 'Almost every year brought formerly unknown insights into the economic conditions of human society, leading to the conclusion that there must have been enormous stretches of time in past history in which there were not yet class struggles, since there was no division into different social classes, no distinction between rich and poor, and no private property.'

cultural elements with similar populations throughout the Levant, Anatolia, and Europe in the neolithic period, connected with the statuary groups often interpreted as the ‘mother goddess.’²⁵

2 Bronze Age Democracy: Tributary Exploitation

If the communist villages had common land, where and how did private property, slavery, and class arise?²⁶ Luxemburg says the domination of one agricultural community over another lays the groundwork for the rise of hierarchical states. A century later, we now know much more about the period in which this development took place in Greece. Between 3,200-1,200 BC, hierarchical states appear in the archaeological record, marked in particular by the so-called Mycenaean palaces that appear in Pylos, Mycenae, Tiryns, Athens, and Thebes from 1,750 BC to 1,200 BC. Engles had previously argued that hierarchy in Greece arose *internally* from a kin-structured military organization similar to the Iroquois. Luxemburg, however, wrote that hierarchy developed from *external* relations between two (or more) agricultural communal societies. Thus, ‘the grafting of a foreign mark onto another allows for exploitation and servitude.’²⁷ Domination arises when the extraction of surplus takes a more permanent form than war or raiding. The relation of external extraction arises between the dominant society and the *externally* exploited agricultural commune. Luxemburg illustrates her theory with the example of the Inca Empire in Peru, where in her account the dominant society was comprised of four ruling ‘gentes’ who lived communally in the palace center in four distinct districts; they comprised the dominant society and they extracted *external* exploitation (i. e. tribute) from the quasi-independent villages who retained their communal use of the land (the primary mode of production). The extraction of tribute led to the development of an internal class of warriors and administrators who were part of the Inca society. Therefore *external* exploitation is the causal mechanism of internal changes within the dominating Inca society. The ‘gentile constitution’ - or internal kinship communal structure - is corroded by its own need ‘to maintain dominance’²⁸ The relation between the social organization of labor and the means of production (primarily land tenure) explains the form of the political economy. Ultimately *external* exploitation corrodes the ‘communist-democratic organization’ of both societies. As Luxemburg explains:

The exploitation of one mark by another has a corrosive effect on the exploited [and exploiting] mark, something we see already with the Incas. The disintegration process is accelerated. First the conquest occurs and then a reconfiguration of the organization takes place. In order to fortify this, a specific class develops, the military, and thus inequality in the mark. Domination from above evolves faster when conquest and wars

²⁵See Perlès 2001

²⁶For an overview of the question of the ‘asiatic mode’ and/or the tributary mode of production, see Zingarelli 2015.

²⁷CWRL 1, p. 301

²⁸CWRL 1, p. 301.

occur.²⁹

The exploited society remains a separate society *because* it maintains primary control of the means of its own (re)production. Thus, Luxemburg contends that, ‘the subjugated are not yet slaves... they are members of the mark as before [...]. Furthermore, this is not yet a class society.’ There is no class domination, no class society in effect ‘because they were not one society’³⁰ and ‘the land remained the property of the inhabitants.’³¹ Timothy Earle, the economic anthropologist, describes the village community, the *ayllu*, in the following terms: ‘the nature of the *ayllu* is widely debated, but it is generally considered to be an endogamous kin group with a communal territory.’³² Tribute (external exploitation) according to Luxemburg, takes four forms among the Inca: (1) agricultural production, (2) livestock production from the ‘mountainous marcas,’³³ (3) compulsory labor, and (4) the provision of ‘a tribute of young women, who were used by the Incas for sacrifice or as concubines.’³⁴ She compares the tributary system to the Greek myth of King Minos and the story of Athen’s annual tribute of 6 boys and 6 girls to the Minotaur at Crete.³⁵

Though she was unaware of the archaeological discovery of Minoan and Mycenaean civilization, Luxemburg’s theory fits well with what we know today. Unfortunately, here we can only provide the most cursory description of how Rosa Luxemburg’s comparative theory speaks to the evidence uncovered in the last century and a half.³⁶ In the palace records of the Mycenaean civilization, the Greek word *dēmos* appears for the first time in recorded history. In the words of the Oxford historical linguist, Leonard Palmer, it means the ‘land and the community attached to it.’³⁷ He described ‘the *dēmos*’ as ‘a land-granting, land-administering tenure-disputing body’ with ‘collectively-held land.’³⁸ Furthermore, two forms of land-tenure are represented in the palace records (Linear B): private land of the palace center and the common land of the *demos*. In the contemporaneous Ugarit palace texts, a similar division between village and palace has been noted. Heltzer describes the village society as follows: ‘They worked on the land and with livestock, owned lands in common, the means of production and the produce from their labour kept both them and the palace dependents. Fiscally and juridically they comprised a single body.’³⁹ In Luxemburg’s reading, the *dēmos* first appears in history as the communal agrarian

²⁹CWRL 1: 304

³⁰CWRL 1, 304

³¹CWRL 1, p. 302.

³²Earle 2002, 194. His general description parallels Luxemburg: ‘The empire of Tawantinsuyu, encompassing approximately 984,000 km², was divided into four administrative quarters centered at Cuzco. The empire comprised about 80 provinces, roughly corresponding to the territories of the subject populations. Provinces were subdivided into two or three political units called *saya*, each subsuming a variable number of *ayllu*... it formed the basic corporate productive group above the household.’

³³CWRL 1, p. 200

³⁴CWRL 1, p. 200

³⁵CWRL 1, p. 303?

³⁶Ian Tewksbury will be presenting a paper in January at the Society for Classical Studies on this topic: ‘What was Slavery at Pylos? A Marxist Reading of the Linear B Tablets’ in January 2025.

³⁷Palmer 1958, p. 88

³⁸Palmer 1958, p. 88

³⁹Heltzer 1976, pp. 63-74; Liverani 1979a, pp. 1333-4, 1342; 1989, pp. 127-8)

village, from whom tribute is extracted through external exploitation. If she is correct, the history of democracy is much different than the standard story our textbooks tell today. It is an account of how the *dēmos* lost its power over its primary means of production: the common land.

3 Athenian Democracy: The Slave Mode of Production

How then did the relations of domination *between* societies become fixed *within* one polity?⁴⁰ We know today that the tribute societies were destroyed around 1200 BC throughout the Mediterranean world. In contemporary scholarship, this was followed by a 200-hundred year period known as the ‘Dark Ages,’ marked by extensive, even mysterious, narratives of depopulation. This narrative was established by a small school of Cambridge scholars in the 1970s, who followed in the wake of the work of the scholar, M.I. Finley.⁴¹ Since the 1970s scholars claim to have rewritten the traditional narrative of the Dorian invasions which were central to the ideology of 19th century scholarship and the Nazi party, but much of the ideology has remains largely the same: European democracy arises *ex nihilo* from small Iron Age groups isolated from the despotism of Near Eastern empires. This mysterious dark age provides the background of Europe’s transition from collective charismatic leadership to the first ‘middling-class’ representative democracies.⁴² This reading is profoundly influenced by the work and ideas of Max Weber.⁴³ It is no surprise that Luxemburg, the woman Weber said ‘[belonged] in a Zoo’ offers a profoundly different interpretation.⁴⁴

Contra the narrative of the inevitable development of liberal democracy, Luxemburg provides an explanation of how the transition from (a) tributary society to the (b) first slave-society arose in the 11th to 7th century BC. Her analysis is comparative and focuses on the means of production and types of social organization that are reflected in the different regions of ancient Greece in this time. She begins with Thessaly, which continued the tributary form of domination into the historical

⁴⁰For a discussion of the debate on the ‘ancient’ and/or the slave mode of production, see García MacGaw 2015 and García MacGaw 2015. For Marxist readings of Athens see n. 1.

⁴¹See Whitley 2020 p.161: ‘The fall of the Mycenaean palace states (which appear to have been kingdoms) is followed by a period whose political structures remain obscure, the Early Iron Age (EIA) or Dark Age between 1200 and 800 BC. 2 Then, after 800 and more probably 700 BC, we see the rise of those distinctive forms of state that people most strongly associate with Greece – the polis (‘city-state’) and the ethnos (ethnic confederacy; see Morgan 2003). Many archaeologists have seen this rise as being connected to a social and structural revolution that took place in the 8th century (Snodgrass 1980: pp. 15–84; cf. Whitley 2001: pp. 98–101). In its most abbreviated form, this process is labeled ‘palace to polis,’ where both palace and polis are taken to be characteristic of the Bronze Age (BA) and EIA/Archaic (AR) period respectively’ in Lemos and Kotsonas 2020.

⁴²See Thuc. i.2 for the Athenian expression of this trope. For the invention of the ‘middling-class,’ see Morris 1986. See the culmination of this work in Morris et al. 2007, which provides a comprehensive reading of ancient Greek history in the terms and ideology of U.S. imperial capitalism. The study of ancient Greek poetry largely follows in the wake of Weber’s celebration of leadership and performance *qua* agency: see Hammer 2022 and Elmer 2013.

⁴³See Mommsen 1990, 1992 for the connection between Weber’s work and the rise of German fascism.

⁴⁴Thomas 2006, p. 154

period.⁴⁵ They ruled over a subject population – the *penetes*, ‘the poor ones.’⁴⁶ The ancient authors noted the structural division in Thessaly between the ruling nobles and the dependent agricultural cultivators who paid tribute.⁴⁷ Luxemburg, like the great 19th century English bourgeoisie historian, George Grote, took this to be the state of social organization which preceeded the rise of the Greek city-state: ‘As a general rule, the cultivation of the soil by slaves or dependents for benefit of proprietors in the cities, prevailed throughout most parts of Greece. The rich men... must have derived their incomes in the same manner.’⁴⁸ These dependents, however, could not be sold – they were not alienatable property. Furthermore, the land they worked was still subject to their community control. Thus, the land was not yet alienated from the community.⁴⁹ Modern historians who seek to explain the rise of Athenian democracy and slavery largely ignore this period.⁵⁰ In order to clarify the detailed nature of these debates and questions, we have summarized Luxemburg’s model in Table I:

Table 1: Luxemburg’s Comparative Analysis of the Social Organization of Labor

Dominating Society	Exploited Society	Exploitation	MOP
Inca / *Mycenae	<i>Demos</i> Village Commune	<i>Tribute</i>	Land Communal
Thessaly	<i>Penetes</i> Village Commune	<i>Tribute</i>	Land Communal
<i>Class-State and the Slave Mode</i>			
Sparta	<i>Helots</i> Village Commune	<i>Slavery</i>	Land <i>Spartan</i>
Athens	<i>Douloi</i> <i>Alienated Property</i>	<i>Slavery</i>	Land <i>Alienated</i>

The first slave-society arose in Sparta as a result of the dominating societies who

⁴⁵i.e. the Aleuadae and the Skopadae. See Xen. Hellen. 6.1.11; Theoc. 16.34

⁴⁶Arist. Pol. 2.6.3; Thuc. 2.99-100

⁴⁷See Grote 1888, vol. 4, pp. 199-200: ‘there were... within these limits other races, inferior and dependent on the Thessalians, yet said to be of more ancient date...’ : (1) the Perhrhaebi (Her. 7.173; Strabo 9, pp. 440-441), (2) the Magnêtes (Skylax, Periplus, c.66; Her. 7.183-188), (3) The Achaeans (Skylax, Periplus. c. 64; Strabo 9, pp. 433-434), (4) The Malians, (5) the Dolopes

⁴⁸Grote 1888, vol. 4, p. 204.

⁴⁹Archemachus ap. Athenae 6. p. 264; Plato Leg. 6. p. 777; Aristot. Pol. 2. 6.3, 7.9.9; Dionys. Halic. A.R. 1.84.

⁵⁰Lewis 2018, p. 6: ‘As for the role of slave labour in classical Greece, many scholars still cling to the belief that slavery barely existed in regions such as Sparta and Crete, where dependent labour is commonly described in terms of serfdom. This taxonomic choice has meant that in some general studies of Greek slavery, Sparta, Crete, Thessaly, and certain other regions are ignored altogether.’

were said to have invaded the region of Crete in the 11th century BC. Like the Thesalians, the Crete invading society ‘conquered’ the people and forced ‘them to hand over portions of the yield of their crops.’⁵¹ The Spartans, however, provide an example of the transition to internal exploitation and the slave mode of production. The ‘the helots,’ the indigenous farming communities that became the communal, state property of Sparta.⁵² The difference between the Dorians and Sparta provides a key to the mystery of private property: when did it become possible for the means of production – the land – to be taken from the dominated farmers? According to Luxemburg, our first evidence for the slave society – the slave mode of production – is Sparta. Here, for the first time, the exploited ‘worked on a foreign land that had previously belonged to them.’⁵³ For the first time, alienated land became the material base of the dominant society.⁵⁴ In contrast to the external tributary exploitation of Peru or Thessaly – ‘a matter of the exploitation of one society by another’ – the class-state in Sparta and its full floruit in Athens is a result of internal exploitation. The land is appropriated by the dominant class, but is worked by the enslaved. In Sparta, however, the process is not complete. The ‘helots’ are not alienable property; only their land had been alienated. The helots can not be exchanged or sold. It is only in Athens that we are presented with the floruit of the class-state.

3.1 Aristocrats and Peasants

In the *Introduction to Political Economy*, Luxemburg clearly outlines two periods of development in Athens. She writes,

... the history of the old mark in classical antiquity leads, on the one hand, to the opposition between a mass of indebted small peasants and the aristocracy that has appropriated military service, public offices, trade and the undivided communal lands as large-scale landed property; and on the other hand, to the opposition between this whole society of free people and the exploited slaves.⁵⁵

As in Sparta, the dominant society entered the region in the 11th or 10th century. As in Thessaly and Sparta, the inhabitants of the commune villages in the region are subjected to intensified tributary exploitation. External exploitation is especially intensified when wine and olive oil production is made for exchange on the Mediterranean

⁵¹CWRL 1: 202.

⁵²Grote 1888, vol4, p. 204: ‘Now the origin of the Penestae in Thessaly, as that of the Helots in Laconia traced to the Dorian conquest.’

⁵³CWRL 1: 303

⁵⁴We presented a paper on Rosa Luxemburg’s work on Sparta last April at the Historical Materialism Istanbul 2024, which discussed this question in depth. What is unique in Luxemburg’s work is her argument that the first ‘slave society’ arose in Sparta. A slave society – the slave mode of production – arises when the dominated external society no longer is forced to pay a portion of the common land they work and which forms the base of their reproduction. It comes into existence when the society’s land (its principal means of production) is alienated. As Luxemburg writes, it arises when the ‘labor power of subjugation’ becomes ‘labor on foreign soil.’ Thus, the alienation of the means of production (the land) is the precursor to the rise of the class-state. This is central to Rosa Luxemburg’s definition of class, because the slave society is the first class state. She clarifies, “A class state is the grouping of classes within a given society.

⁵⁵CWRL 1: 206.

market which arose in the 9th to 8th century BC. The commodity market created an incentive for the dominant society to intensify land exploitation. At first the whole society would have engaged in trade, and 'since the mark as a whole could not carry on trade' 'public officials became, at the same time, the natural public organs of trade.' It is from these officials that the ruling class aristocracy arose within the dominating society. The Eupatridae, the aristocrats who called themselves 'the well-fathered,' took power and established political control over 'war and trade.' As the 'aristocracy ceased to participate in the production process,' competition among the elite families led to the establishment of debt-slavery. Rosa Luxemburg believed that money entered at this period and further intensified the demand of exploitation, transforming the tribute traditionally collected from the subject farming communes into monetary debt.⁵⁶ The demand for land led to the aristocratic families' privatization of territories inhabited by the old commune demes. As the ruling families demanded increasingly higher tribute from dependent farmers, they fell into debt. The only surety they could provide for repayment was their body. Where the peasants failed to pay their debts, they became debt-slaves who could be sold as a commodity like wine and oil. Those who were sold into slavery began to lose their traditional land and more and more land began to become the private property of the ruling families in Athens. Primogeniture arose to protect landed wealth and to control inheritance. The conflict between the generations and within families led to the colonization process which we now know began circa 750 BC. In the 8th century, the Eupatridae increased its use of slave labor and it extended to the agricultural sphere. Within; the wealthy farmers from the countryside now contend against the poorer farmers in their region who are indebted and enslaved. These tensions were untenable. Revolution, stasis, became the general condition of the 7th century.

3.2 Citizens and Slaves

In 1877, in a work titled, 'The History of Freedom in Antiquity,' Lord Acton expresses the view of Solon that was central to liberalism and which Rosa Luxemburg critiqued in the reformist Bernstein: 'From... universal degradation the world was rescued by the most gifted of the nations...' It was the great legislator, Solon, who rose to solve the social problem of antiquity and create the model of democracy on which liberalism would stand in the constitutional nation-states rising in Europe. It was 'Solon' who first gave the demos 'a voice in electing magistrates from the classes above them, and the right of calling them to account.' Here, we are told, is the seed the 'mighty change' to come:

It introduced the idea that a man ought to have a voice in selecting those to whose rectitude and wisdom he is compelled to trust his fortune, his family, and his life. And this idea completely inverted the notion of human authority, for it inaugurated the reign of moral influence... Government by consent superseded government by compulsion, and the pyramid which had stood on a point was made to stand upon its base. By

⁵⁶We now know coinage is developed a bit later - in the 7th century in Lydia and 6th century BCE in Greece.

making every citizen the guardian of his own interest Solon admitted the element of Democracy into the State.⁵⁷

Rosa Luxemburg is not interested in the legendary figure of Athens' founding father; she is interested in the unique moment in history in which two societies tied together by external relations of tribute domination become one society who share citizenship. The most important aspect of Solon is the record of the class division that was recorded in history under his name. In order to placate the revolutionary conditions of aristocratic competition for privatized land and its effect on the indebted agricultural communities who were slipping into a state of permanent bondage, the constitution of Solon proposed the compromise of class-regulated citizenship. The people of the demes, the agricultural communes, were demanding the return of the common land system, but this was not granted. Instead, debt-slavery was abolished. The wealthier farmers who had been able to succeed in the regions of agriculturally rich plains surrounding Athens and who had been able to replicate in miniature the success of the aristocrats in Athens were granted citizenship and a limited role in the political state. The poor farmers were offered citizenship as well, but at the price of accepting the permanent privatization of land which demanded that they enter the competitive internal market with the limited land they could claim to possess. Those who had no land at all became permanent rentiers and yearly faced the risk of dispossession. Each type of citizen was marked by the amount of wealth they could produce on their own land.⁵⁸ This led to the privatization of the land of all the citizens and the permanent establishment of the class-society. The old ruling families retained the largest amount of land and production. They controlled the essential political offices and powers. Knight, those with the wealth to maintain a horse, were a secondary class. Third, wealthy farmers who could maintain a large farm and afford the cost of the military equipment of the infantry were deemed Hoplites. Last, in the lowest class, there were the subsistence farmers who had faced debt-slavery and had called for the redistribution of the common land. They were forced to work as waged labor. Solon's compromise class-state entailed the right to citizenship and civic participation in the assembly. It comes at a cost. While the Solonian Revolution outlawed the slavery of members of the Attic territory, it sanctified the use of slavery, the private property system, and the patriarchal household. Thus, it extended the private property regime once and for all to what was left of the communal village societies. Athens became one polity, which carefully regulated the class relations of the political and social society on the basis of private property in land. For today's talk, we will have to end here - at the establishment of Solon's class-state in Athens.

⁵⁷CWRL 1: 206.

⁵⁸See Aristotle Athenian Constitution 1.7: 'He [Solon] divided the population according to property into four classes, just as it had been divided before, namely, Pentacosiomedimni, Knights, Zeugitae, and Thetes. The various magistracies, namely, the nine Archons, the Treasurers, the Commissioners for Public Contracts (Poletae), the Eleven, and Clerks (Colacretae), he assigned to the Pentacosiomedimni, the Knights, and the Zeugitae, giving offices to each class in proportion to the value of their rateable property. To who ranked among the Thetes he gave nothing but a place in the Assembly and in the juries. A man had to rank as a Pentacosiomedimnus if he made, from his own land, five hundred measures, whether liquid or solid. Those ranked as Knights who made three hundred measures, or, as some say, those who were able to maintain a horse.'

It is a fitting place to end because it reveals what we believe was the central point of Rosa Luxemburg's interest in ancient history and its importance for the socialist struggle. How does Athenian democracy work? Why did the ruling aristocrats accept the compromise of citizenship? Because slavery allowed them to continue the process of exploitation and open up all of Attica to the forces of private property. This last point is essential. Slavery became universalized and it justified the base of the Athenian claim to citizenship. In the philosopher, Aristotle, slavery became the natural foundation of political life and the nature of humanity. Political life became equated with the right to a voice - the right to vote but not the ability to question or change the economic foundation of the ruling class. The symbol of the citizen most lauded by liberal history is the vote: the right to have 'a voice' in the political state. Indeed, the citizens did receive the vote in the assembly. The assembly is perhaps the most revered symbol of the ancient Greek democracy as well as the liberal idea of reform politics. Rosa Luxemburg's history, the one she taught in the night course to the working classes in Berlin in the decade before WWI, was not intended to reveal the simple story of the progress of democracy. It was essential to understand what was gained but also what was lost in the history of democracy. The Greek word vote tells the story of Rosa Luxemburg's three periods of democracy. The word for the vote - the right to have a lot in the decisions and functioning of the state - is the ancient Greek word *kleros*. It means 'allotment.' The word has three meanings, each of which reflect its historical development. In earlier history, the term meant first: one's allotment of land to work for the season in the agricultural commune and this word was used for the equal distribution of land in the colonies. Later, the term was used by the Spartans to refer to the land taken from the helots which was distributed in equal shares to all of the Spartiates and which produced the communal meal structure of the male military communism warrior-class. What the Spartans gained in land, the Athenians gained in speech and representation. In short, what the Athenians gained was 'a voice'; what they lost was the base of the old agrarian communism: the common ownership of the land once called the 'demos.' Luxemburg's final lesson for the question of reform and revolution is that modern democracy is our 'lot.'

Conclusion: The Lesson of Athenian Slavery

Why is everything today bound up with the ancient Greek world? What were the workers of Berlin expected to learn about the struggle for liberation from Aristotle? Let us conclude by returning to the early 20th century and the life of Rosa Luxemburg. In the *Introduction* to Volume 5 of *Luxumburg's Collected Works*, Scott and Le Blanc revive the end of Luxemburg's life:

When Germany was on the brink of revolution in 1918, the capitalists turned to the anti-revolutionary leadership of Social Democracy to save their system, making a deal with the now governing leaders of the SPD and the trade union bureaucrats, who joined with them against the masses struggling for social transformation. The reformists, those who claimed to shun violence in favor of a peaceful path, joined with reactionaries to

send paramilitaries (precursors of the fascists) to crush worker uprisings and soldier rebellions. In January 1919, they had Luxemburg and her comrades brutally murdered; this marked a turning point for the working-class movement and the reversal of the revolutionary tide. .. this was not the inevitable outcome. There is much that can be learned from this period that came so close to world revolution, and Rosa Luxemburg's legacy continues to be a rich resource for ongoing global struggles.⁵⁹

The reason everything is bound to ancient Athenian history is simple: it is because its internal domination and exploitation in modern democracy lives on. The bedrock of Athenian democracy was slavery. Slaves were commodities - tools of reproduction. Aristotle states the situation baldly: slaves were not citizens. They were born by nature to be the tools of citizens: elite men. This is the natural theory of slavery which was much admired by the American founding fathers. Aristotle's honesty reveals the real Athenian democracy. We are called to do the same. The foundation of modern democracy is wage-labor; wage labor transforms us into commodities - tools of production. She writes,

The uninterrupted victory of democracy, which to our revisionism, as well as to bourgeois liberalism, appears as a great fundamental law of human history and, especially, modern history, is shown upon closer examination to be a phantom... The phantom of democracy was already laid bare by Marx when he wrote 'just as the ancient state had slavery as its natural basis, the modern state has as its natural basis civil society: the slave of labour for gain.'⁶⁰

Let us end today with her words in 'What does the Spartacus League want': 'Instead of employers and wage slaves, free comrades in work! Only in that society can hatred between people and servitude be uprooted. Only when that society is realized will the earth no longer be defiled by murder.' The inevitability of the fall of capitalism is often misunderstood. The argument of Marx and Luxembourg is dialectical. The phantom of democracy will be laid bare by capitalism; in turn this will destroy the legal fiction of liberal constitutionalism. What will be revealed is the logic of capitalism which seeks the limit of the concentration of capital and the commodification of labor. The day when the facade of democratic constitutionalism will longer serve the global accumulation of capital wealth is here.. When that facade has crumbled - and with it the bourgeois world order that has prevailed since the French revolution - only two paths remain: to uproot servitude once and for all or to pretend we can reform it once again. We face reality for it is and struggle for the true democracy - socialism. Or, we can hide in the shadows and accept what capitalist democracy it will become: fascism.

⁵⁹Scott and Le Blanc 2024, pp. 17-18

⁶⁰3, 113

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Appendix I: Sources and Estimates for the Study of Athenian Slavery

Table 2: Slavery Numbers in Athens and Sparta

Scholar	ATHENS		Scholar	SPARTA	
	Year	Slaves		Year	Slaves
Hume	1752	40,000	Manso	1800	312,000+
Boeckh	1817	365,000	Müller	1839	365,000
Wallon	1847	200,000	Wallon	1847	200,000
Beloch	1886	100,000	Beloch	1886	175,000
Meyer	1898	150,000	Guiraud	1893	220,000
Cavaignac	1908	150,000	Grundy	1908	375,000
Van Hook	1923	50,000	Kahrstedt	1919	180,000
Westerman	1940	50,000 ?	Coleman-Norton	1941	250,000
Jones	1957	20,300	Ehrenberg	1969	160,000
Gomme	1980?	100,000	Cartledge	1987	185,000
Hansen	1980?	40,000	Talbert	1987	190,000
Scheidel	1995	40,000	Figueroa	2000?	90,000