

INTERVIEW: Stefanie Ehmsen

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It has been said that Rosa did not identify with the feminist movement of her time, and yet she remains one of the most pivotal figures for socialist feminists in the U.S. and worldwide. What is the significance of Rosa and the socialist feminist movement today?

Rosa Luxemburg certainly had an interesting relationship with the feminist movement during her lifetime. On the one hand, she rejected the idea that she somehow belonged to the movement simply because of her sex and did not identify herself as a feminist. On the other hand, being a strong and independent thinking and acting woman – personally and politically – in a male-dominated world made her serve as role model for many (feminist) women and still does. And while she was critical of the “bourgeois” women’s movement that did not want to talk about issues of class, she on several occasions wrote supportive pieces for socialist feminist groups. One of her closest friends and advisors was Clara Zetkin, a founder of the proletarian women’s movement. Ultimately, Luxemburg believed that bringing about Socialism was the most important task in securing equality for the oppressed – be they women, Jews, or the disabled – but this did not delegitimize good work on behalf of any one oppressed group.

Rosa Luxemburg has a great deal to teach today’s socialist feminists in how she understood relationships between different oppressed groups. She understood how “feminist” issues related both to questions of immigration and racism, as well as to the broader struggle of the labor movement as a whole. In her work she often sought to shine light on the connections between the most oppressed that were created by their shared exclusion from the political realm. These connections are as real today as they were at that time, and the work of understanding and articulating them remains paramount for the critical socialist feminist.

Can you expand on the assertion that she criticized Marxism as dogma?

Rosa Luxemburg criticized all dogma. She was a polemicist by nature, and she believed fully in the importance of criticizing all systems of thought toward the betterment of the labor movement. Returning to Marx himself, Rosa principally criticized the tendency of some to apply one static formula to all political questions, as opposed to engaging

critically with Marx’s works to find new solutions to the challenges of the time.

Now, when we speak about her criticism of Marxism as dogma, it’s important to identify just which Marxism she was talking about. She certainly criticized Bernstein and Kautsky, but if anything it was for their lack of dogma, if you wish, i.e. their abandonment of the maxims established by Marx. Later, despite considering herself a great supporter of the Russian Revolution, she was also critical of the Bolsheviks – “Freedom is always the freedom of those who think differently,” she famously wrote.

Your site mentions that she “never shunned tenderness and sensibility” throughout all her actions. Was this a conscious decision on her part? A precursor to what we today call “feminist process”?

More than a conscious decision (or a consciously political act), I think that Rosa Luxemburg’s well-known “tenderness and sensibility” – well-known to many from Margarethe von Trotta’s feminist movie on her life – was a part of her personality. It certainly had to do with her resolve to always be honest to the person she was. She was a woman of tremendous principle, and she drew much of her strength from her adherence to these principles. I think of her tenderness as the flip side of this rigor; quite simply, she had a tender spirit and was determined never to stifle it, and always to nourish it through her personal relationships and her love of nature. And yes, I personally would view this trait as something of a precursor to “feminist process” and its dialectical approach of seeing the personal as political, though I wouldn’t be surprised to see Rosa disagree with me if she were alive today!

What message would you like to send to socialist feminists in celebration of International Women’s Day?

I think the main message is that we still need to fight for full equality. Women are more than half of the world’s population, but they own less than ten per cent of the wealth. They bear most of the duties, but receive few of the rewards. Many times, they do not even have full control over their bodies. So I would say to all the activists of the global women’s movement: Continue your hard work! And keep in mind that only if you think and act internationally, we can fight together for a better, a democratic and socialist future.