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Do Arendt and Luxemburg Have a Remedy for Our Dark Times?

Henk van den Belt

Few would deny that we live in dark times. Even if we are lucky to have a regular job, we may still be struggling to meet the steadily rising bills of food, energy, transport, housing, and education. Our globalized economy does not seem to work in the interests of ordinary citizens, but disproportionately rewards the rich and the powerful. It also reinforces the tyranny of clock time, which alienates us from local and natural rhythms. We are increasingly confronted with the negative consequences of climate change, while governments appear incapable of providing effective countermeasures. As citizens lose faith in politics, populism spreads, authoritarian rule is in the ascendancy, and blatant forms of racism and sexism are on the rise again. Fake news, disinformation, and conspiracy theories dominate social media. In an atmosphere of distrust and hostility, growing international tensions may suddenly erupt in war and the spectre of nuclear annihilation becomes a credible prospect again. The list of disturbing trends can be readily extended.

With such a bleak outlook it would not be surprising if people lost all hope. Joke Hermsen's book is intended to keep hope alive at this critical juncture in time. She does this by borrowing extensively from the ideas of two of her heroines, Hannah Arendt and Rosa Luxemburg, who have lived through earlier dark times and succeeded, against all odds, to keep their spirits high. It is indeed remarkable how Arendt, after fleeing from Nazi Germany and finding a new home in America, was able to regain her love of the world and to strike a hopeful note in her account of political action by stressing the ever-present possibility of "new beginnings." The case of "Red Rosa," who had also been Arendt's heroine since her youth, is hardly less remarkable. While held in prison during the First World War for her antimilitarist actions, she wrote uplifting letters to comrades and friends and never lost her faith in the socialist cause. The appendix of Hermsen's book contains several of Luxemburg's letters, which show her great love of nature and culture. Hermsen started reading Luxemburg's political writings while in France during the protests of the *gilets jaunes* against the neoliberal policies of Macron's government. She was impressed by the power of ordinary people to say no and hoped that their protests might be the first signs for a turning of the tide, all the while taking to heart Luxemburg's lesson that the spontaneity of the masses cannot be directed from above by a political party.

An important part of Arendt's and Luxemburg's message is therefore to keep hope alive. If that were the entire message, however, it would be just an edifying Sunday sermon. The subtitle of Hermsen's book suggests that the two political theorists have more substantial "political advice" for us in store. For Hermsen, their main advice comes down to a plea to start experimenting with citizen councils, following the examples of the Paris Commune of 1871 and the councils of workers and soldiers that sprang up in Russia and Germany in the aftermath of the First World War. Such popular councils, she holds, would help to turn the tide and ameliorate our current problems by granting ordinary citizens an active role in the creation of the conditions for a good and dignified life.

The overall line of argumentation by which Hermsen connects her diagnosis of the present problems, and her proposed remedy, runs across the chapters of her book and is not fully explicated. In my reconstruction, it consists of the following steps:

- (1) Unrestrained capitalism ("hyper-capitalism") is responsible for our current woes (as described in the introductory paragraph of this review).
- (2) The basic flaw of this system is the subordination of the political to the economic domain.
- (3) A socialist revolution in the Marxist sense of an expropriation of the means of production offers no solution for it suffers from the same flaw.
- (4) To overcome its subordination to the economy, the political space must be kept free from economic necessities.
- (5) Instituting citizen councils is a way to create a democratic political space that is free from economic necessities.
- (6) Citizen councils may help to remedy the harmful tendencies of "hyper-capitalism."

Although Hermsen invokes the authority of Arendt and Luxemburg to support her argument, she cannot deny that there are fundamental differences in the views of both political thinkers. Indeed, Hermsen devotes chapter 8 of her book to an imaginary dialogue in heaven that the two thinkers conduct after their death. This dialogue was originally written as a play for a Belgian theatre company. It is an attractive and original way to develop an argument through staging a debate between two contending parties. This chapter is by far the most exciting

chapter in the book. However, it leaves the differences between Arendt and Luxemburg largely unresolved. When Arendt advocates instituting popular councils to renew the democratic order, Luxemburg replies that ordinary people will be unable to participate as long as their basic needs remain unfulfilled. But when Luxemburg argues for the necessity of a socialist revolution, Arendt retorts that such a revolution deprives people of their freedom and still subordinates politics to the economy. A compromise seems within reach when Luxemburg suggests that we can just make a start with popular councils, which “can help get a local, co-operative economy up and running” (92). But here Luxemburg seems to have abandoned her cherished idea of a socialist revolution, at least in the Marxist sense of a forced expropriation of the means of production. It is also doubtful whether Arendt would have agreed that councils should take up economic tasks at all.

Hermesen’s idea that citizen councils are somehow able to subordinate the economic domain to the political, and thus to ameliorate the harmful tendencies of unrestrained capitalism, raises many questions. It appears that her diagnosis is fatally ambiguous once we start seriously thinking about what a proper remedy would be. Should the untamed beast of “hyper-capitalism” be restrained and tamed (again) or is it beyond remediation and should it instead be killed off and replaced by something else? Can we turn our backs on the existing capitalist economy and simply start with renewing the political order by instituting popular councils? In other words, what would the desired subordination of the economy to politics exactly look like? Merely proposing citizen councils leaves these crucial questions unanswered. Luxemburg and Arendt held fundamentally different views on these matters, a difference that Hermesen failed to resolve. Worse, neither of their views much helps us to find a feasible solution to our current woes. In fact, Arendt and Luxemburg are among the least promising candidates from whom to expect such a solution.

If we turn to Arendt’s writings for guidance on how to tame the economic beast, we will find the outcome to be disappointing. It is true that she greatly deplored the relentlessly expanding cycle of production and consumption, but her ideal mode of politics was supposed to turn its back on the workings of the economy. Her ideal was inspired by the ancient Greek polis. In that setting, political action in the public sphere was an opportunity for free men to show who they were and to acquire fame and glory for their words and deeds, without having to concern themselves with “economic” issues, which were left to the private household. It was this

normative model that Arendt applied to the modern world, leading to the odd recommendation that political actors should steer clear of engaging with economic and social problems. In *On Revolution* (1963), she makes an invidious comparison between the American and the French revolutionaries. While the Founding Fathers deliberated about the best form of government, the French revolutionaries fell into the error of attempting to solve the “social question,” with all the fatal consequences that resulted from this mistake. The noble game of politics apparently turns on participation for the sake of participation. Arendt also celebrated the workers’ councils that arose in the immediate aftermath of the First World War as opportunities for ordinary people to also participate in public affairs, but warned that such councils must not make the “fatal mistake” of trying to run factories. She would thus not even subscribe to Hermsen’s idea of a popular council that could “get a local, co-operative economy up and running” (92).

For Luxemburg, by contrast, politics was not just for the sake of politics, but ultimately aimed at effecting a revolution that would install a socialist economy. Hermsen makes much of her criticism of Lenin’s dictatorial methods and her defence of democracy and freedom. Luxemburg also supported the workers’ councils and rejected the party dictatorship inaugurated by the Bolsheviks. Still, it must be said that, like all Marxists at the time, she had only a dim conception of what a socialist economy would look like and, more crucially, whether it would “work” at all. What should have been clear, however, is that the envisaged destruction of capitalism and the transition to socialism were bound to be an extremely violent process. One may well doubt whether the democratic rights and freedoms cherished by Luxemburg would survive such a radical transformation. She did not live to see the likely practical results of her socialist proposals, because her life was cut short in January 1919 by her brutal murder committed by right-wing *Freikorps* troops acting on behalf of the German government. As Hermsen writes, “What would have happened to Germany if ‘free socialist democracy’ had succeeded can, unfortunately, only be left to our imagination” (71). The murder of Luxemburg has turned her into an icon, allowing her followers to admire her ideal of a “free socialist democracy” in its full purity, untainted by the harsh reality checks of politics and economics.

Hermsen calls both Arendt and Luxemburg “critical mavericks” (77), also citing Arendt’s view that “it might be doubted that [Luxemburg] was a Marxist at all” (62). However, Luxemburg was in many respects faithful to the Marxist orthodoxy, not only in her attack on Eduard

Bernstein's revisionism, but also in her undiminished belief in the laws of historical development, which shines through in several of the letters appended to Hermsen's book. Such historicist beliefs were anathema to Arendt, but they served to keep Luxemburg's socialist hope alive. Her principal theoretical work, *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), while unorthodox in many ways, also followed the template of Marxist orthodoxy in one important respect. Luxemburg deviated from orthodoxy by arguing that the accumulation of capital always needs a non-capitalist environment, hence the economic imperative of colonialism and imperialism. Once the whole world had been incorporated into the capitalist system, however, accumulation would grind to a halt, because there would be no more non-capitalist areas left. Luxemburg thus thought to have demonstrated, in line with Marxist orthodoxy, that capitalism would eventually "collapse" under the weight of its own "contradictions."

One option that is conspicuously absent in Hermsen's discussion on how to subordinate the economy to politics is social-democratic reformism. Her failure to seriously discuss this alternative is inexcusable, as a radical reformist policy may be the only feasible option at present for taming the capitalist beast. Luxemburg and Arendt had different reasons to reject this option. For Luxemburg, as she made clear in *Reform or Revolution* (1900), accepting reformism à la Bernstein would be giving up her big dream, the imagined classless society lying beyond the horizon of capitalism as the "final goal" of the socialist labour movement. After all, Bernstein had challenged his comrades by declaring that "the final goal is nothing, the movement is everything," and by advocating a sustained reform programme of realizing concrete improvements in the life conditions of ordinary people within the framework of the existing capitalist system. In his view, social democrats should abide by the rules of parliamentary democracy and abjure the irresponsible dream of a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Luxemburg objected that the reforms that would be possible under capitalism fell far short of the desired emancipation of the working class. Reformists also ignored, she held, that under capitalism the state remained a class-based state. It would be an illusion to think that the state could be an instrument serving the interests of the general population, even with social-democratic governments. Luxemburg did not completely scorn the day-to-day struggle to achieve concrete improvements in the lives of workers, but she held that the room for them was limited and that they could at best be only temporary achievements, likely to be reversed at the next economic crisis. The main reason to undertake the struggle for concrete reforms, in her view,

was that it would raise the class consciousness of the workers and prepare them for the big revolutionary task ahead. Hermsen accepted Luxemburg's rejection of reformism rather uncritically, without questioning the Marxist assumptions from which she departed.

Arendt had her own reasons to reject reform politics. She was not impressed by the considerable successes achieved by western democracies in the three decades after the Second World War to improve the lot of the general population through Welfare State policies such as progressive taxation, social security, widening educational opportunities, and Keynesian fiscal policy. For Arendt, all these interventions were merely exercises in "national housekeeping," unworthy of the dignity of politics. She would most likely have accused the reformist politicians of subordinating the political to the economic domain.

One might argue that in the end Luxemburg was right after all in so far as the Welfare State, far from proving a lasting achievement, was increasingly dismantled by neoliberal policies from the last decades of the twentieth century on. That argument cuts no ice, however, for neoliberalism is not an economic necessity of capitalism, but a political "counter-revolution" intent on reversing the achievements of the Welfare State through cutbacks, deregulation, and liberalization. What we now need is a new popular political movement to counter this counter-revolution and push back neoliberalism in its turn. A green and social-democratic reform politics would best fit the bill. The aim is to abolish "hyper-capitalism," not capitalism. The economic beast must be tamed and constrained to safeguard our future and create a liveable and humane world.

Biography

Henk van den Belt was assistant professor in philosophy at Wageningen University, The Netherlands, until his retirement in 2019. He now lives in Secret Harbour, Western Australia.