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## **ROSA LUXEMBURG, IMPERIALISM AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

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**PATRICK BOND**

**Luxemburg's Critique of Capital Accumulation,  
Reapplied in Africa**

*ABSTRACT Rosa Luxemburg's Accumulation of Capital provided Africa's first known Marxist account of class, race, gender, society-nature and regional oppressions. She was far ahead of her time in grappling with the theory and practice of capitalist/non-capitalist relations that today not only characterise Western multinational corporate extraction but also that of firms from several contemporary 'emerging' economies. This article contends that in her tradition, two recent areas of analysis now stand out, even if they have not yet received sufficient attention by critics of underdevelopment: the expanded understanding of value transfers from Africa based on natural resource depletion; and the ways that collaborations between imperial and subimperial national powers (and power blocs) contribute to Africa's poverty. Using these two newly-revived areas of enquiry, several aspects of Luxemburg's Accumulation of Capital stand out for their continuing relevance to the current conjuncture in contemporary Africa: capitalist/non-capitalist relations; natural resource value transfer; capitalist crisis tendencies and displacements; imperialism then and imperialism/subimperialism now; and the need to evolve from protests to solidarities through socialist ideology.*

*KEYWORDS accumulation by dispossession, Africa, imperialism, natural resources, subimperialism*

## **I. European capitalist enclaves versus Africa's non-capitalist society and nature**

Rosa Luxemburg's (2003 [1913]) *Accumulation of Capital* was her attempt at advancing Marxist theory at a time, just before World War I, when internecine competition between major capitalist powers was generating unprecedented tensions across Europe. The preceding years had already witnessed major political-economic analyses of imperialism, such those as by John Hobson (1902) and Otto Bauer (1907), focusing on capital export, and by Rudolf Hilferding (1981 [1910]) who argued that *Finance Capital* fused various fractions of capital under the influence of the half-dozen largest banks. In subsequent years, Nicolai Bukharin (1972 [1915]: 104) identified "increased competition in the sales markets, in the markets of raw materials, and for the spheres of capital investment" as the "three roots of the policy of finance capitalism." Vladimir Lenin (1986 [1917]) would contribute further aspects of inter-imperial rivalries that brought capitalist classes, their states and their hinterlands into conflict, in opposition to what Karl Kautsky (1914) envisaged would be a more peaceful stage of "ultra-imperialism" due to the self-interest the major corporate groups had in collaborating with each other across borders (for a survey see Brewer 1980).

Using a very different lens, Luxemburg watched imperialist processes unfold mainly by examining how capital super-exploited the non-capitalist spheres in Europe's colonies. For Luxemburg (2003: 426), "[i]mperialism is the political expression of the accumulation of capital in its competitive struggle for what remains still open of the non-capitalist environment." Under conditions of overaccumulation crisis, she argued, capitalism would turn ever more frantically to extra-economic extraction of surpluses:

"Accumulation of capital periodically bursts out in crises and spurs capital on to a continual extension of the market. Capital cannot accumulate without the aid of non-capitalist relations, nor... can it tolerate their continued existence side by side with itself. Only the continuous and progressive disintegration of non-capitalist relations makes accumulation of capital possible. Non-capitalist relations provide a fertile soil for capitalism; more strictly: capital feeds on the ruins of such relations, and although this non-capitalist milieu is indispensable

for accumulation, the latter proceeds at the cost of this medium nevertheless, by eating it up. Historically, the accumulation of capital is a kind of metabolism between capitalist economy and those pre-capitalist methods of production without which it cannot go on and which, in this light, it corrodes and assimilates.” (Luxemburg 2003: 327)

For Luxemburg, imperialism was not a process simply of capital flowing into a region and setting up compatible class relations. Her orientation to Marx’s reproduction schemas – notwithstanding the flaws therein (Hopfman 2007) – indicated how the ebb and flow of capital and the rise of crisis tendencies together generated and accelerated uneven development:

“Marx emphasises perpetual ‘overproduction’, i.e. enlarged reproduction, since a strict policy of simple reproduction would periodically lead to reproductive losses. The course of reproduction shows continual deviations from the proportions of the diagram which become manifest

- (a) in the fluctuations of prices from day to day;
- (b) in the continual fluctuations of profits;
- (c) in the ceaseless flow of capital from one branch of production to another, and finally in the periodic and cyclical swings of reproduction between overproduction and crisis.” (Luxemburg 2003: 76)

It is well understood – by Marxists (and a very few others) – how in today’s crisis-ridden world, perpetual overproduction has caused a long stagnation since the 1970s, characterised by “periodic and cyclical swings of reproduction between overproduction and crisis” (Luxemburg 2003: 76). Capital’s turn towards ever-more intense bouts of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ – the term used by Harvey (2003) to re-articulate Luxemburg’s insights on capitalist theft from the non-capitalist spheres – means that observations she made in 1913 retain relevance today.

For example, Luxemburg (2003: 447) argued that capitalism “is the first mode of economy which is unable to exist by itself, which needs other economic systems as a medium and soil... In its living history it is a contradiction in itself, and its movement of accumulation provides a solution to the conflict and aggravates it at the same time.” To illustrate, in *The Accumulation of Capital*, Luxemburg (2003) recounted several vital historical

examples of simple commodity reproduction and capitalist/non-capitalist relations: ancient Germans (the mark communities); the Inca of Latin America; India; Russia; the French versus Algerians; the Opium Wars in China; mechanisation versus the interests of U.S. farmers; debt in late-19<sup>th</sup> century Egypt; and conditions of early 20th century resource extraction and socio-political organisation in South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), i.e., the core sites of British-German-Belgian imperialism.

It would be 50 years before her focus on capitalist/non-capitalist relations were again pursued with Marxist rigour. In West Africa's Ivory Coast, French anthropologist Claude Meillassoux (1925-2005) carried out studies on the Guro women's role in what he termed 'domestic economy,' especially its articulation with wage labour during the 1960s. During the 1970s, South African sociologist Harold Wolpe (1926-1996) applied Meillassoux's (1975) ideas to help revive and regenerate his South African Communist Party's tradition of race-class debate (Wolpe 1980). And in 1978 Anne-Marie Wolpe (1930-2018) contributed a much more gendered analysis of social reproduction within articulations of modes of production (Kuhn/Wolpe 1978).

In 1973, Egyptian political economist Samir Amin (1931-2018) published his theory of unequal exchange based on surplus value transfers associated with lower productivity (especially in Africa) in relation to the North's higher productivity outputs sold to the South, and his many subsequent books elaborated the geopolitical implications of imperial power. At one point soon thereafter, when reviewing early theories, Amin (1977: 258) claimed that "Luxemburg did not really understand imperialism" and "confused new imperialism with old expansionism." Nevertheless, later he reassessed her work and upgraded his view considerably, as noted below. At the same time, Ugandan Marxist Dani Nabudere (1929-2011) was critical of the "Luxemburgist thesis" that "is at the back of today's 'centre-periphery' ideology." Nabudere (1979: 12) insisted, "[f]or Luxemburg, imperialism is no more than the struggle by the capitalist countries 'for what remains of the non-capitalist world,'" leading to a major "deviation from the Marxist thesis." However, the durability of capitalist/non-capitalist relations meant that value transfers and extreme uneven development would continue to be studied by Africa's applied economists, such as Malawian economist Guy

Mhone (1943-2005) with his unique theory of ‘economic enclavity’ during the 1980s (Mhone 2001).

By the 1990s, a series of Marxist theorists working in Africa had brought into our world view, respectively, explanations of uneven development emphasising historic and world-imperialist processes (Luxemburg), patri-lineal extraction (Meillassoux), labour productivity differentials (Amin), South African super-exploitation (the Wolpes) and regional Southern African labour migration (Mhone). In various ways, all generated fruitful engagements when considering the political economy of friction between capitalist and non-capitalist social relations. Unfortunately, the 1980s-90s experienced a relatively infertile scholarly terrain, so this tradition receded, given the debilitating environment of austerity and triumphant liberalism in Africa, especially in intellectual milieus including universities.

Nevertheless, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed a rebirth of Luxemburgist arguments about imperialism, as shown below. Partly this revival can be traced to renewed political-economic analysis by David Harvey, specifically *The New Imperialism* (2003), which re-introduced Luxemburg through the concept of accumulation by dispossession. By 2017, Harvey’s *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason* had more forcefully acknowledged not only non-capitalist environmental goods and services as ‘free gifts of nature’ within the circuitry of capital, but also non-capitalist social reproduction (gendered by patriarchal socio-political culture) as vital ‘free gifts of human nature’ to capital (Harvey 2017: 96). The latter exist in all societies, given the way household and community relations draw upon women’s unpaid labour power. However, it is the former – the natural resource depletion that Africa most relies upon – that helps explain Africa’s unique impoverishment, a topic we turn to next.

## **2. From dispossession of natural economy to natural resource depletion**

Luxemburg’s (2003: 347) strategy for exploring accumulation in 1913 was concerned not only with the ‘commodity economy’ and ‘the competitive struggle of capital on the international stage,’ but also for ‘natural economy,’ a category that included pre-capitalist social relations as well as

nature. “What is most important,” Luxemburg (2003: 349) wrote, “is that, in any natural economy, production only goes on because both means of production and labour power are bound in one form or another,” unlike capitalism in which machinery is often introduced at the expense of jobs, as production becomes increasingly capital intensive. She includes within the category ‘natural economy’ various features of the environment: “land, game in primeval forests, minerals, precious stones and ores, products of exotic flora such as rubber, etc.” In such economies, she argued,

“The communist peasant community no less than the feudal corvee farm and similar institutions maintain their economic organisation by subjecting the labour power, and the most important means of production, the land, to the rule of law and custom. A natural economy thus confronts the requirements of capitalism at every turn with rigid barriers. Capitalism must therefore always and everywhere fight a battle of annihilation against every historical form of natural economy that it encounters, [...]” (Luxemburg 2003: 349).

When capital gains possession of minerals, precious stones and ores, this represents the expropriation of the colonies’ natural wealth:

“The most important of these productive forces is of course the land, its hidden mineral treasure, and its meadows, woods and water, and further the flocks of the primitive shepherd tribes. Since the primitive associations of the natives are the strongest protection for their social organisations and for their material bases of existence, capital must begin by planning for the systematic destruction and annihilation of all the non-capitalist social units which obstruct its development.” (Luxemburg 2003: 350)

The relevance of these observations has never been greater, for hidden mineral treasure remains the main prize of imperialism in Africa. Luxemburg (2003: 339) observed that “[t]he economic basis for the production of raw materials is a primitive system of exploitation practiced by European capital in the African colonies and in America, where the institutions of slavery and bondage are combined in various forms.” Likewise in his final book, Amin moved from a focus mainly on labour as the basis for value transfer, to natural resources:

“Capitalist accumulation is founded on the destruction of the bases of all wealth: human beings and their natural environment. It took a wait lasting a century and a half until our environmentalists rediscovered that reality, now become blindingly clear. It is true that historical Marxisms had largely passed an eraser over the analyses advanced by Marx on this subject and taken the point of view of the bourgeoisie – equated to an atemporal ‘rational’ point of view – in regard to the exploitation of natural resources.” (Amin 2018: 86)

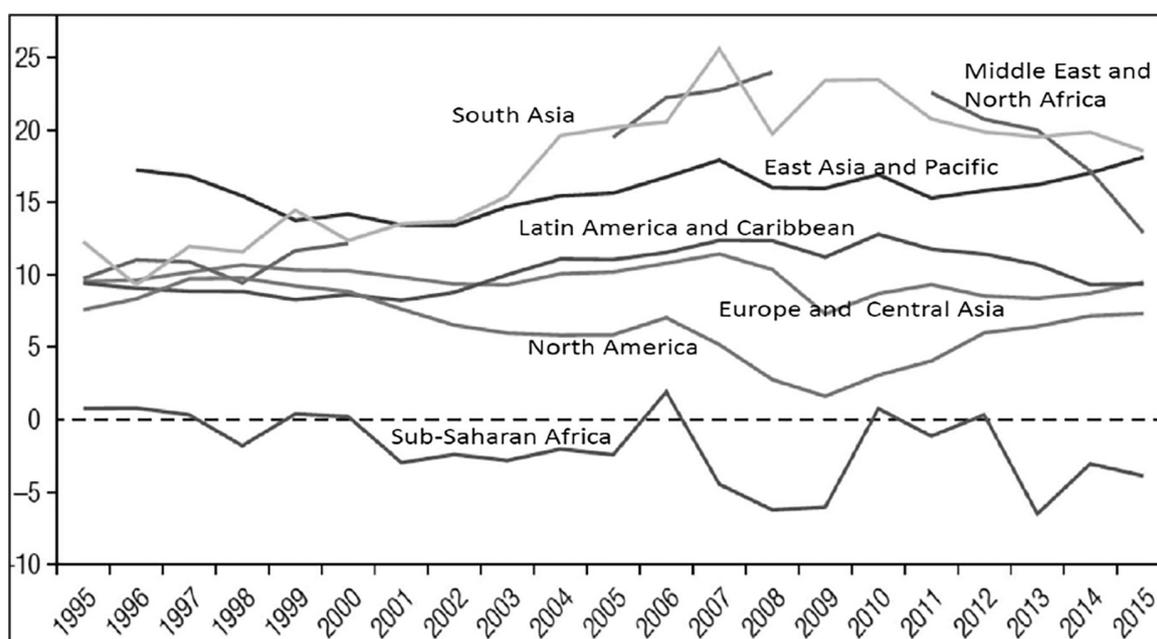
How great is this transfer of value? Empirically, there is growing evidence of Africa’s net resource extraction losses due to ‘natural capital depletion,’ far in excess of what are known as the ‘Illicit Financial Flows’ and even licit flows of profits repatriated by transnational capital (Bond 2018). Luxemburg was concerned about the general extraction process, but it is in the sphere of non-renewable resource depletion that capitalist/non-capitalist power relations most aggressively generate imperialism. Before considering updates of Luxemburg’s perspective in Africa, this feature of the natural economy deserves more explanation.

Increasingly sophisticated measurements of natural resource depletion are carried out by the World Bank in its series *The Changing Wealth of Nations*. Therein, Lange et al. (2018) calculate ‘Adjusted Net Savings’ (ANS) over time, to correct national income accounts, specifically the share of genuine savings within Gross National Income (GNI). The first step in this recalculation is to acknowledge shrinkage of fixed capital (wear and tear), which in Sub-Saharan Africa has been in the range of negative 10-12 percent annually over the past two decades. The second step is to add ‘human capital’ investments in the form of education expenditure, which in Sub-Saharan Africa has been in the positive 3-5 percent range. The third is measurement of natural capital depletion and fourth is subtraction of economic damage done by pollution, which together range from 8 to 15 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa (mostly resource depletion). The higher the price of resource commodities, such as in the 2008 and 2011 peak ‘super-cycle’ years, the more the shrinkage of a country’s natural wealth. Lange et al. (2018: 47) calculate that nature constitutes 9 percent of world wealth, but in Sub-Saharan African countries it amounts to more than a third of their wealth.

Hence in Africa, it is especially pernicious that the shrinkage of natural wealth is uncompensated for by reinvestment of the profit drawn from that wealth, as a result of multinational corporations (from both the West and BRICS countries) extracting resources but providing the bulk of their returns on investment to overseas shareholders. In contrast, resource-intensive countries – including the likes of Canada, Australia, Norway and much of the Middle East – have a different accumulation process: home-based corporations or state mining or oil companies are responsible for extraction. The revenues from the resources extracted are thus to a much greater extent redistributed, leaving a positive ANS in many resource-rich countries outside Africa.

Applied to Africa, even the most rudimentary ANS analysis is devastating. In one count (World Bank 2014: 14), 88 percent of African countries are net losers from resource extraction once ANS is calculated. Using 1990-2015 data, Lange et al. (2018: 74) conclude that Sub-Saharan Africa loses a net \$100 billion of ANS annually, albeit with data limitations: the platinum and diamond sectors, and a few countries with data gaps (including the resource-rich DRC and South Sudan) (Figure 1). If North African, the DRC and Sudan were added, along with the platinum and diamond depletion, it is likely that Africa's annual net loss is \$150 billion. As Lange et al. (2018: 82) concede, "Especially for resource-rich countries, the depletion of natural resources is often not compensated for by other investments. The warnings provided by negative ANS in many countries and in the region as a whole should not be ignored."

In aggregate over 1995-2015, some African countries suffered extreme ANS 'dissaving': Angola lost 68 percent, the Republic of the Congo lost 49 percent and Equatorial Guinea lost 39 percent (Lange et al. 2018: 74). Especially in the 2006-10 and 2012-15 years, there were substantial ANS losses in Africa (Figure 1). Subsequently, commodity export values ebbed, along with aid, foreign investment and remittances, leaving most African countries back in their debt traps and growth crises, facing much more active rebellions (Bond 2018).



**Figure 1:** Adjusted Net Savings as percentage of Gross National Income, 1995–2015  
*Source: Lange et al. 2018: 64.*

### 3. Capitalist crises beget imperialism and *subimperialism* in Africa

Recognising that, as Luxemburg (2003: 327) put it, “Accumulation of capital periodically bursts out in crises and spurs capital on to a continual extension of the market,” Samir Amin (2018: 159) took the logic further:

“How is it that full-fledged industrial capitalism expanded victoriously throughout the 19th century, survived its first systemic crisis of senility during the 20th century, and faces apparently victoriously until this day its second long crisis of senility? The answer cannot be found in the abstract theory of capitalism, but on the ground of the concrete history of its deployment. These two sides of the analysis should not be confused and reduced to one. After Marx himself (for his time) Rosa Luxemburg was the first Marxist thinker who made a serious attempt to answer the question [...]

The fundamental – fatal – contradiction of capitalism resulted into continuous overaccumulation and therefore, faced a problem of outlet for capitalist production. On that ground Luxemburg is certainly right. How this contradiction has

been overcome in history? Here also Luxemburg is right: capitalism expanded by destroying pre-capitalist modes of production both within the societies of the dominant centers and the dominated peripheries. Handicrafts are replaced by manufacturing industries, small shops by supermarkets etc. This process of accumulation by dispossession still goes on with the current privatization of former public services. Simultaneously these responses of capital to the problem of outlet constitute an efficient counterforce to falling rates of profits.”

As Luxemburg (2003: 319) further observed, however, “The solution of one difficulty, however, only adds to another.” The solution isn’t really a *resolution*. Instead, it is better conceived of as an efficient counterforce that acts merely to displace not resolve the crisis tendencies. And to establish the geographical terrain on which capitalist crisis displacement unfolded a century ago – and still does today – meant Luxemburg had to criticise the geopolitics of a colonialism that fit her theory of imperialism so well.

That geopolitical terrain was carved out in her adopted city of Berlin, at a 77 Wilhelmstrasse mansion where the ‘Scramble for Africa’ took place in 1884-85. Not a single African was there to negotiate, but indeed that site – today a pub and block of nondescript flats after its post-war demolition – is a central reason why Africa is carved into 54 dysfunctional country units, splitting relatives from each other and imposing colonial-era languages in perpetuity. The Berlin conference’s codification of colonial power – mainly held by Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium and Germany – ensured the penetration of capitalist legal systems of property ownership, the settler’s monopoly of violence, and the introduction of monetary arrangements. With these capitalist innovations, colonial powers set up pseudo-states in Africa so as to more effectively loot the continent. But Luxemburg’s (2003: 447) great innovation was to prove how colonial-imperial accumulation used Africa’s natural “economic systems as a medium and soil.”

In South Africa, it soon became clear to the world’s colonial powers how valuable their conquests could be:

“British capital revealed its real intentions only after two important events had taken place: the discovery of the Kimberley diamond fields in 1869-70, and the discovery of the gold mines in the Transvaal in 1882-5, which initiated a new epoch in the history of South Africa. Then Cecil Rhodes went into action. Public

opinion in England rapidly swung over, and the greed for the treasures of South Africa urged the British government on to drastic measures.

The modest peasant economy was forthwith pushed into the background – the mines, and thus the mining capital, coming to the fore. The policy of the British government veered round abruptly. Great Britain had recognised the Boer Republics by the Sand River Agreement and the Treaty of Bloemfontein in the fifties. Now her political might advanced upon the tiny republic from every side, occupying all neighbouring districts and cutting off all possibility of expansion.” (Luxemburg 2003: 394)

The period of the late 1800s in which colonial-imperial power consolidated was also one of a sustained world capitalist crisis, in which the City of London, the Paris financial markets and other financiers marshalled over-accumulated capital, directing its flows into the adventurous investments associated with Rhodes, Belgium’s King Leopold II and other larger-than-life accumulators-by-dispossession (Phimister 1992).

If we reconsider the relations between North and South a century later, as did Harvey in *The New Imperialism*, we relearn the relevance of Luxemburg’s ideas. Harvey (2003: 185f) both echoes and expands her vision:

“The opening up of global markets in both commodities and capital created openings for other states to insert themselves into the global economy, first as absorbers but then as producers of surplus capitals. They then became competitors on the world stage. What might be called ‘subimperialisms’ arose... each developing centre of capital accumulation sought out systematic spatio-temporal fixes for its own surplus capital by defining territorial spheres of influence.”

That dynamic, in turn, requires us to think of the way the BRICS – the coordinated network of heads of state and corporations from Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – arose as subimperial allies of world capital’s expansionism to “define territorial spheres of influence” (Harvey 2003: 186), especially after the 2008 crisis. Their new physical spaces include neo-colonial land grabs in Africa by voracious investors from India, China, South Africa and Brazil (Ferrando 2013). The gateway to Africa is South Africa – as was oft-repeated at the 2013 BRICS Durban summit and 2018 Johannesburg summit – and is facilitated by territorial

expansion up-continent by Johannesburg capitalists who had been kept (by the apartheid laager) mostly within local boundaries until the early 1990s.

In addition to sources of food and biofuels, BRICS capital is highly engaged in African minerals and petroleum. Anglo American, Glencore and other (now Europe-rebased) manifestations of South African mining capital run roughshod in Africa. For example in 2005, after a Human Rights Watch expose, Anglo admitted working closely with Congolese warlords in a zone where several million people have been killed since the late 1990s. Then there is the \$10 billion Lake Albert oil stake by former South African president Jacob Zuma's hapless nephew Khulubuse, working alongside Israel's main extractive-industry tycoon, the notorious Dan Gertler (Bond/Garcia 2015, Bond 2017).

There are just as worrisome tendencies in southern Africa from the other BRICS, e.g.: Vedanta's well-known (and self-confessed) looting of Zambian copper, India's move into Mozambican land expropriation in search of coal (after Rio Tinto's failure) alongside Brazil's giant Vale, China's Anjin working with Zimbabwean generals to loot the Marange diamond fields, and the Russian steel manufacturer Roman Abramovitch's (London-based) parasitical takeover of South Africa's second-largest steel plant (Evraz Highveld) in the same spirit as India's (Luxembourg-based) Lakshmi Mittal, who took over the largest set of steel foundries (Arcelor-Mittal). Both BRICS investors stripped South African assets, without reinvestment, hence leading in 2015 to massive chunks of the continent's main sites of steel capacity being deindustrialised with thousands of job losses. The central cause was cheap Chinese imports due to that country's over-accumulation of several hundred million tons of steel production capacity (Bond 2017). The advertised cooperation between the BRICS sometimes looks, in the harsh light of reality, like cannibalism.

In addition, the expansion is often explicitly subimperial, in the sense of lubricating capitalist relations in non- or less-capitalist geographical territories, often through multilateral power structures. One of the world's most powerful vehicles for this process is the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in which the BRICS have played a greater role since 2015. After donating nearly \$100 billion to recapitalising the IMF, four BRICS gained voting share reallocations: China up by 37 percent, Brazil by 23

percent, India by 11 percent and Russia by 8 percent. Yet to accomplish this required that seven African countries lose more than a fifth of their IMF voting share: Nigeria (41 percent), Libya (39 percent), Morocco (27 percent), Gabon (26 percent), Algeria (26 percent), Namibia (26 percent) and even South Africa (21 percent). Africa's suffering in multilateral fora included the 2015 World Trade Organisation summit in Nairobi, in which BRICS members allied with the European Union and U.S. to destroy food sovereignty by agreeing to forego agricultural subsidies (Raghavan 2015), and in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, in which Africa's interests were sacrificed so that the BRICS, EU and US could arrange the Copenhagen, Durban and Paris deals: there were no binding emissions cuts, accountability systems or recognition of the West's and the BRICS' climate debt (Bond 2016).

Commercial, retail and infrastructural expansion are also vital for penetrating African markets. South African retail capital's takeover of African supermarkets and nascent shopping malls is led by Makro, which is owned by Walmart, a reliable representative of both imperialism's unprecedented concentration of wholesale capital, and its exploitation of the ultra-cheap assembly line. Luxemburg would point out how that line stretches far to the east, into the super-exploitation of China's workers, rural women and environment, and the outsourcing of greenhouse gas emissions. But as the then SA deputy foreign minister Marius Fransman (2012) put it: "Our presence in BRICS would necessitate us to push for Africa's integration into world trade."

The BRICS states' intention here is to aid the extractive industries – especially BRICS firms – in stripping the continent further. Outside South Africa (by far the continent's largest holder of minerals, often estimated in the trillions of dollars), the other main African countries with extensive mining resources were Botswana, Zambia, Ghana, Namibia, Angola, Mali, Guinea, Mauritania, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. Africa's oil and gas producers are, in order of reserves, Nigeria, Angola, Ghana, Gabon, Congo (Republic), Equatorial Guinea, Chad and Uganda. To further extract Africa's raw materials, planning began for a new \$93 billion/year Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa, and the BRICS New Development Bank was launched in 2015 with a view, in part, to provide financing for such mega-infrastructure projects. The first such loan (for \$200 million)

was for the expansion of a port-petrochemical complex in Durban, in spite of it encountering strong community opposition (D'Sa/Bond 2018). Many such projects will likely fit into Beijing's territorially-ambitious Belt and Road Initiative.

All of this is reminiscent of the ways colonial-backed capital penetrated the African continent, and resistance rose, as Luxemburg (2003: 447) described it in South Africa:

“The ultimate purpose of the British government was clear: long in advance it was preparing for land robbery on a grand scale, using the native chieftains themselves as tools. But in the beginning it was content with the ‘pacification’ of the Negroes by extensive military actions. Up to 1879 were fought nine bloody Kaffir wars to break the resistance of the Bantus. The more ruthlessly capital sets about the destruction of non-capitalist strata at home and in the outside world, the more it lowers the standard of living for the workers as a whole, the greater also is the change in the day-to-day history of capital. It becomes a string of political and social disasters and convulsions, and under these conditions, punctuated by periodical economic catastrophes or crises, accumulation can go on no longer.”

#### **4. Capitalist contradictions, subimperial ambitions and violence**

The geopolitical and military tensions between subimperial South Africa and Africa (as a whole) began to heighten just as world commodity prices began to crash. From 2011-15, the slowing rate of Chinese growth and overproduction tendencies meant the decline of major mineral prices by more than 50 percent. In South Africa's case, the collapse of coal and platinum prices by more than half was devastating to the share values of major firms with local operations – Lonmin, AngloPlats and Glencore – whose net worth quickly plummeted by more than 85 percent (indeed by 99 percent in Lonmin's case, leading to the firm's demise and takeover in 2017). It is in this context of crisis plus super-exploitative relations between capitalist and non-capitalist spheres that the Luxemburgist theory of imperialism finds confirmation in contemporary Africa. In 2013, WikiLeaks published emails hacked by Jeremy Hammond from the files of Stratfor

(known as the private-sector version of the Central Intelligence Agency), which quite correctly summed up the situation in the region as follows:

“South Africa’s history is driven by the interplay of competition and cohabitation between domestic and foreign interests exploiting the country’s mineral resources. Despite being led by a democratically-elected government, the core imperatives of SA remain maintenance of a liberal regime that permits the free flow of labor and capital to and from the southern Africa region, and maintenance of a superior security capability able to project into south-central Africa.” (Stratfor 2009)

The democratically-elected government of the African National Congress (ANC) explicitly calls itself ‘anti-imperialist’, and yet in 2013, a century after Luxemburg explained the inner necessity of imperialism to turn to violence in search of extra-economic wealth (capitalist versus non-capitalist looting), a small but revealing example emerged in the Central African Republic (CAR). There, President Francois Bozize’s special advisor Didier Pereira had partnered with ‘ANC hard man’ Joshua Nxumalo and the ANC’s funding arm, Chancellor House, to establish a diamond export monopoly. According to *Mail&Guardian* newspaper investigators AmaBhungane (2013), “Pereira is currently partnered to the ANC security supremo and fundraiser, Paul Langa, and former spy chief Billy Masetlha.”

The result was that both Presidents Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma deployed troops to first support Bozize at the presidential palace, and after he fled, to protect Johannesburg firms’ operations in the CAR capital of Bangui. But the city was over-run by rebels on the weekend prior to the BRICS summit in Durban, and tragically, 15 of the 220 South African National Defence Force (SANDF) troops involved in a massive fire fight against the rebels lost their lives in Bangui, and were returned home in coffins just as the BRICS leaders also flew in. The incident very visibly demonstrated the limits of South Africa’s “superior security capability to project into south-central Africa” (Stratfor 2009).

But SANDF wasn’t alone in striving – even if failing – to serve capital’s most excessive interests. For seven months before, in mid-August 2012, the local South African Police Service (SAPS) gained international notoriety for the massacre of 34 wildcat-striking Lonmin platinum mineworkers at

Marikana. The police were called in via emails from Cyril Ramaphosa, the owner of 9 percent of Lonmin. He was the former mineworker leader in the late 1980s whose national strike breakthrough shook apartheid. Ramaphosa soon became a black billionaire capitalist and remained so close to the ANC elites – becoming deputy president of the ruling party in late 2012 and the country’s deputy president in 2014 – that he carelessly told the police minister he wanted a “pointed response” to the “dastardly criminal” mineworkers, in an email on 15 August 2012. Within 24 hours, the police committed the Marikana Massacre (Farlam Commission 2015).

As Luxemburg (2003: 351) had predicted,

“The method of violence, then, is the immediate consequence of the clash between capitalism and the organisations of a natural economy which would restrict accumulation. Their means of production and their labour power no less than their demand for surplus products is necessary to capitalism. Yet the latter is fully determined to undermine their independence as social units, in order to gain possession of their means of production and labour power and to convert them into commodity buyers.”

## **5. The necessity of resistance, solidarity and ideology**

At this point, the South African working class and other activists in the ‘natural economy’ – e.g. women opposed to mining extraction (Womin 2018) – were fed up with the displacement of capitalist crisis tendencies into their households. By the 2010s, the South African worker suffered lower wages relative to capital’s profits (by more than 5 percent compared to 1994); rising inequality, up to an exceptionally high “market income Gini Coefficient” of 0.77 (World Bank 2014); extreme poverty, rising to 63 percent of the population by 2011 (Budlender et al. 2015); and soaring financial obligations. The latter were important, insofar as deregulated loan-sharks had moved en masse to the Marikana platinum fields to find borrowers. The mineworkers soon had so many loan repayments stripping their income that, by 2012, they became absolutely desperate. Left with little in their monthly pay-checks, they insisted on a \$1000/month wage (i.e., double the existing payment), since the lenders’ ‘emolument

attachment orders' reduced their take-home pay to virtually nothing. Even after the massacre, the workers stayed atop the hillside in their thousands, on strike for a full month to win the \$1000/month, and in 2014 more than 70,000 workers struck for five months across all the other platinum fields, before winning their salary demand, but at the expense of enormous misery and fury (Saul/Bond 2014).

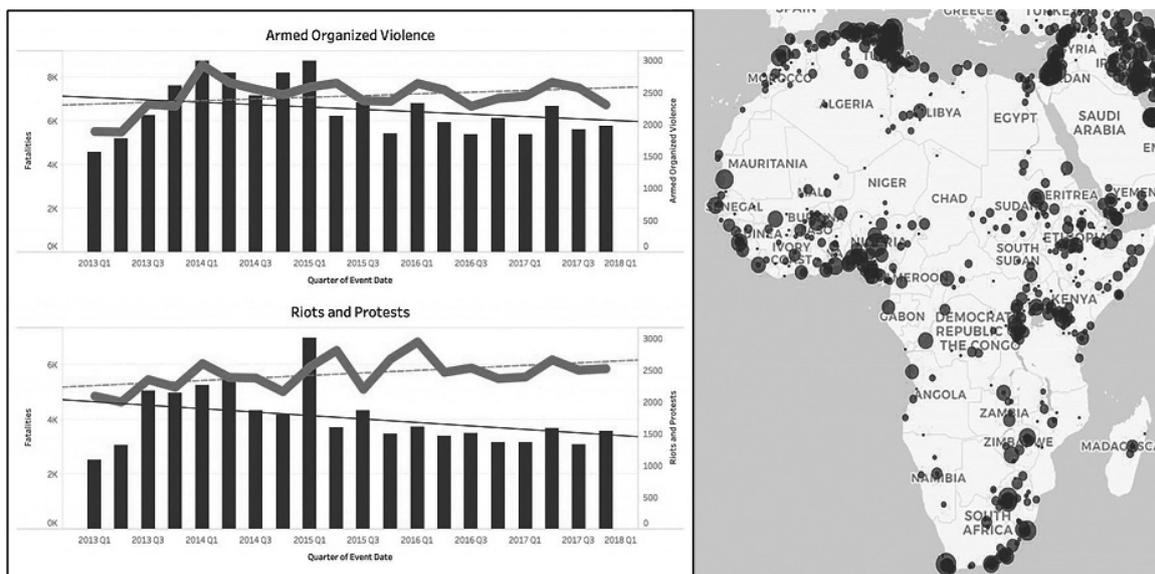
It was all too reminiscent of Luxemburg's description of the same terrain a century earlier:

“The more ruthlessly capital sets about the destruction of non-capitalist strata at home and in the outside world, the more it lowers the standard of living for the workers as a whole, the greater also is the change in the day-to-day history of capital. It becomes a string of political and social disasters and convulsions, and under these conditions, punctuated by periodical economic catastrophes or crises, accumulation can go on no longer. But even before this natural economic impasse of capital's own creating is properly reached it becomes a necessity for the international working class to revolt against the rule of capital.” (Luxemburg 2003: 447)

The necessity is felt in many African class struggles. The African working class is angrier than any other continent's, according to the World Economic Forum (2017) whose Global Competitiveness Index each year measures 'employer-labor cooperation.' Since 2012, the South African proletariat has had the leading position as the world's least cooperative working class (in 2011 the class was ranked 7<sup>th</sup>, reflecting the intensification of struggles such as Marikana). The 32 African countries included in the survey are by far the most militant of the 138 sites surveyed annually, for of these, 28 African proletariats score above the world median of militancy, and just four below. Of the most militant 30 countries' workforces in 2017, a dozen were African: South Africa (on a scale of 1 as most militant to 7 as least, scoring 2.5 in 2017) followed by Chad (3.5), Tunisia (3.6), Liberia (3.7), Mozambique (3.7), Morocco (3.7), Lesotho (3.7), Ethiopia (3.8), Tanzania (3.8), Algeria (3.8), Burundi (3.8), and Zimbabwe (4.0).

Communities are also engaged in unrest, especially in areas of resource extraction. In South Africa, the number of 'violent' demonstrations – mostly 'service delivery protests' recorded by the police – soared

from fewer than 600 per year in 2002-04 to nearly quadruple that number by 2014 (Alexander et al 2018). As the case of Burkina Faso suggests – what with its popular 2014 overthrow of Blaise Compaoré and his subsequent in-exile prosecution for the murder of the great African Marxist revolutionary Thomas Sankara in 1987 – the anger occasionally boils over into local and national revolts. The tempo of revolt is apparently increasing, especially since the peak and then fall of commodity prices in 2011 (Figure 2). Protests have begun to exhibit patterns so stark they were even recognised in the African Development Bank et al.’s (2017: 135) annual *African Economic Outlook* (AEO) chapter on Governance. The 2017 AEO found that after protests over wages and salaries, “Dissatisfaction with political arrangements was among the main drivers of public protests in Africa from 2011 to 2016. The majority of these protests called for more accountability and justice in the public management systems and for fairer elections. This is an indication of demand for higher standards of integrity within public institutions.”



**Figure 2:** Africa’s uprising: Number of ‘armed organised violence’ (mainly by states) and fatalities (2014-18), and locations of ‘riots and protests’, 2007-18

Source: *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project* (2018). *Conflict Trends*. <http://www.acleddata.com/>

Socio-economic grievances were evident in many of the uprisings. Indeed, the rise and contagion of generalised protests since 2011 (Figure 2) is remarkable. There were always major outbursts, and in some countries – Zambia (2001), Malawi (2002), Gabon (2003), Nigeria (2006), Cameroon (2008), Niger (2009) – they had a major impact on politics. But notably in 2011, the protest wave did not simply crest, briefly, as a result of North African turmoil, and then fall. The Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan uprisings caught the world's attention, but only Tunisia's outcome generated democracy and even then the next stage of socio-economic unrest began in 2018, as neoliberalism failed the country. Many protests subsequently led to such strong pressure against national power structures that just as with the once-invincible Ben Ali, Mubarak and Gaddafi regimes, long-serving leaders were compelled to leave office.

Nevertheless, higher levels of African protests persisted, moving across the continent (Brandes/Engels 2011, Ekine 2011, Manji/Ekine 2012, Dwyer/Zeilig 2012, Biney 2013, Mampilly 2013, Branch/Mampilly 2015, Wengraf 2018). The pressure was maintained in particular sites, including Senegal (2012), Burkina Faso (2014), Burundi (2015), Rwanda (2015), Congo-Brazzaville (2016), and DR Congo (2016). In 2017-18, leaders backed by similarly formidable state and political party apparatuses as enjoyed by Zuma (South Africa), Desalegn (Ethiopia) and Mugabe (Zimbabwe) fell surprisingly rapidly, in part due to mass uprisings with tens of thousands protesters massing in national capitals and other major cities, many of whom were furious about resource depletion and looted state funds.

Other protests which have recently reflected strong community pressure on their governments include Togo (against the dictator Faure Gnassingbé), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (against Laurent Kabila), Cameroon (mainly against Paul Biya, some of which demanded Anglophone-Cameroonian independence), Somalia (against Islamic extremism), Morocco (against corruption and unemployment), Libya (against slave markets), Uganda (against Yoweri Museveni's overturning of term limits) and Kenya (against Uhuru Kenyatta's dubious election). In The Gambia, protests against Yahya Jammeh succeeded in ensuring the integrity of a December 2016 election, which the long-serving dictator lost.

Local opposition aimed at blocking mining and petroleum extraction has the potential to become far more effective. In 2015, Anglo American's

CEO expressed concerned about the “\$25 billion worth of projects tied up or stopped” across the world (Kayakiran/Van Vuuren 2015). According to the Johannesburg faith-based mining watchdog Bench Marks Foundation (2018: 2) at the 2018 Alternative Mining Indaba, “Intractable conflicts of interest prevail with ongoing interruptions to mining operations. Resistance to mining operations is steadily on the increase along with the associated conflict.”

If we take these signs of dissent seriously, it is not only the removal of corrupt, unpatriotic regimes that is needed, though that is a pre-condition. What now urgently needs discussing in many settings, in the spirit of Luxemburg, is the replacement of neo-colonial African compradors and the corporations they serve, with a political party and programme of popular empowerment. An egalitarian economic argument will be increasingly easier to make now that world capitalism and the dynamics of deglobalisation are forcing Africa towards rebalancing. This will ultimately compel discussion of much more courageous economic policies, potentially including:

- in the short term, as currency and debt repayment crises hit, reimposing exchange controls will ensure control of financial flows, quickly followed by lowered interest rates to boost growth, with an audit of ‘Odious Debt’ before any further repayment of scarce hard currency, along with much better management of imports – to serve national interests, not the interests of elite consumers;
- as soon as possible, the adoption of an ecologically sensitive industrial policy aimed at import substitution (making things locally), sectoral re-balancing, meeting social needs and true sustainability;
- once finances are secure, it will be possible to dramatically increase state social spending, paid for by higher corporate taxes, cross-subsidisation and more domestic borrowing (and a looser money supply – known in the West as ‘Quantitative Easing’ – if necessary, so long as it does not become hyper-inflationary);
- the medium- and longer-term economic development strategies will reorient infrastructure to meet unmet basic needs, by expanding, maintaining and improving the energy grid, plus water and sanitation, public transport, clinics, schools, recreational facilities and universal access to the internet; and

- in places like South Africa and Nigeria that have an excess reliance on extraction and burning of fossil fuels, it will be vital to adopt what have been termed ‘Million Climate Jobs’ strategies to generate employment for a genuinely green ‘Just Transition’.

These are the kinds of approaches requiring what the continent’s greatest political economist, Amin (1990), long ago termed ‘delinking’ from global capitalism’s most destructive circuits. He stressed that this is not a formula for autarchy, and certainly would gain nothing from North Korean-type isolation. But it would entail a sensible approach to keeping G20 states and corporations at bay as much as possible, while tapping into even more potentials for transformation.

The crash of oil and mineral prices starting in 2011 confirms that the commodity super-cycle and the era of ‘Africa Rising’ rhetoric is now decisively over. The period ahead will perhaps be known as Africans Uprising against Africa Rising. Looking at this continent a century ago, Luxemburg (2003: 394) found instances of non-capitalist, anti-capitalist resistance, just as the German government began its genocide of the Herero people of Namibia. From North Africa to South Africa, colonialism ran into trouble.

The same bloody wars are being fought against African uprisings. What was missing a century ago, and still is today, is a coordinated strategy so that when revolt rises as the capitalist system meets non-capitalist societies and nature in Africa, the resistance can be stronger and sturdier – and become genuinely anti-capitalist – than we have experienced to date. The anti-colonial but resolutely nationalist politics which Frantz Fanon warned about – when writing of what he termed the ‘Pitfalls of National Consciousness’ exhibited by petit-bourgeois leaders – still prevail, and a genuinely radical pan-African anti-capitalism is still to be widely articulated. As Fanon (1967) put it in *Toward the African Revolution*, “the deeper I enter into the cultures and the political circles, the surer I am that the great danger that threatens Africa is the absence of ideology.” In his speech “The Weapon of Theory,” Amílcar Cabral (1966) agreed: “The ideological deficiency within the national liberation movements, not to say the total lack of ideology – reflecting as this does an ignorance of the historical reality which these movements claim to transform – makes for one of the

greatest weaknesses in our struggle against imperialism, if not the greatest weakness of all.”

Luxemburg points the way forward on ideology, flowing directly from the various experiences of proletarian and pre-proletarian uprisings that she so carefully observed – at a distance from Africa but with the most solidaristic concern – and that she organised in Europe until her 1919 murder, six years after writing these words to conclude *The Accumulation of Capital*:

“Even before this natural economic impasse of capital’s own creating is properly reached it becomes a necessity for the international working class to revolt against the rule of capital. Capitalism is the first mode of economy with the weapon of propaganda, a mode which tends to engulf the entire globe and to stamp out all other economies, tolerating no rival at its side. Yet at the same time it is also the first mode of economy which is unable to exist by itself, which needs other economic systems as a medium and soil. Although it strives to become universal, and, indeed, on account of this its tendency, it must break down—because it is immanently incapable of becoming a universal form of production. In its living history it is a contradiction in itself, and its movement of accumulation provides a solution to the conflict and aggravates it at the same time. At a certain stage of development there will be no other way out than the application of socialist principles. The aim of socialism is not accumulation but the satisfaction of toiling humanity’s wants by developing the productive forces of the entire globe. And so we find that socialism is by its very nature a harmonious and universal system of economy.” (Luxemburg 2003: 447)

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*ABSTRACT Rosa Luxemburg lieferte mit Akkumulation des Kapitals als erste marxistische Ökonomin einen für Afrika relevanten Zugang zu den Strukturkategorien Klasse, ‚Rasse‘ und Geschlecht sowie zum Verhältnis Natur-Gesellschaft und zu regional definierten Unterdrückungsverhältnissen. In ihrer Beschäftigung mit der Theorie und Praxis des Verhältnisses zwischen kapitalistischen und nichtkapitalistischen Sphären, die die westliche multinationale, kommerzielle Extraktion und darüber hinaus die Politik von Firmen aus sogenannten ‚emerging economies‘ heute bestimmen, war sie ihrer Zeit weit voraus. Der vorliegende Artikel argumentiert, dass in Luxemburg’scher Tradition zwei Analysebereiche besondere Aufmerksamkeit seitens der kritischen Entwicklungsforschung verdienen: ein erweitertes Verständnis der – auf Raubbau basierenden – Werttransfers aus Afrika sowie die Beschäftigung mit Kollaborationen zwischen imperialen und subimperialen nationalen Mächten (und Machtblöcken), die Afrikas Armut mitverantworten. Anhand dieser zwei wiederbelebten Forschungsbereiche lassen sich zahlreiche Aspekte aus Luxemburgs Akkumulation des Kapitals nennen, die bis heute nicht an Relevanz für das Verständnis der gegenwärtigen Situation in Afrika verloren haben: das Verhältnis zwischen kapitalistischen und nichtkapitalistischen Sphären, der Werttransfer natürlicher Ressourcen, kapitalistische Krisentendenzen und Verdrängungen, Imperialismus damals und Imperialismus/Subimperialismus heute sowie die notwendige Weiterentwicklung unterschiedlicher Protestformen zu einer – von sozialistischer Weltanschauung getragenen – Solidarität.*

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