ROSA LUXEMBURG AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION

It has generally been assumed that the position adopted by Rosa Luxemburg on the national question has been problematical because of an apparent indifference to the principles of national self-determination. This view has been outlined by Lenin in various articles in his collected works. He contends that if a nation is oppressed and dominated by a more powerful nation then the only principled position is to adopt the perspective of the support of the effective realisation of the emancipation of that nation from the situation of political domination so that it is able to define its own destiny and ability to control its distinct affairs. But Rosa Luxemburg is critical of this standpoint because it does not allow for the extent of the possible economic integration that has occurred between the dominant and subordinated nation, and so what would be a more progressive resolution of this situation of subordination would be the realisation of national autonomy in terms of the effective creation of what would be a federation. In this manner the connections between the working classes of the dominant and subordinated nations could be upheld in terms of the principles of internationalism. In this manner the aims of socialism could be more effectively advanced. Luxemburg outlines her standpoint in the article: ‘The National Question’ (Marxist Internet Archive). What she is concerned to analyse is the issue of national self-determination which is a policy aim of the political programme of Russian Social Democracy with regards to the perspective of the liberation of nations which are presently dominated by the Tsarist empire. Luxemburg understands that there may be a tension between the internationalist character of the struggle of the workers in the various parts of the empire and the apparent fact that the aim of liberation from Tsarism would seem to be advanced in terms of the realisation of the standpoint of national self-determination. In this context it would seem to be logical and principled that Social Democracy should recognise the role of national self-determination as part of the process of what would be a democratic revolution that would express the possibility to establish more favourable conditions for the realisation of socialism.

However Luxemburg disputes this view and comments: “What is especially striking about this formula is the fact hat it doesn’t represent anything specifically connected with socialism nor with the politics of the working class.”(chapter one: The right of nations to self-determination p2) The point that is being made is that the aim of self-determination seems to be an expression of the interests of the national capitalist class and so is not conducive to the realisation of the interests of the working class. Instead what would result from the process of the expression of the aspiration of national self-determination under the leadership of the bourgeoisie would be a situation in which the possibility to consolidate the exploitation of the working class would be intensified and consolidated. But this apparent viewpoint does not allow for the possibility that it could be the workers who lead the struggle for self-determination and so the result of this situation could be the creation of a state in which the aims of the proletariat were more likely to be realised. In other words, there is nothing inevitable about the possibility of the national bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation being the leadership of the struggle for self-determination. Instead it could be quite feasible that the workers with a revolutionary leadership should become the basis of the struggle to overcome the situation of national oppression. Therefore, there are two major flaws. On the one hand Luxemburg seems to reject the necessity of the progressive nature of the struggle for self-determination because it is assumed that it cannot occur under the leadership of the working class, and on the other hand the position of the programme of Russian Social Democracy seems to assume that the bourgeoisie will be the inherent force that leads this process of the overcoming of national self-determination. However, Luxemburg has an answer to these apparent dilemmas and limitations which is to adopt the contrasting programmatic approach of Austrian Social Democracy: “The Austrian party would solve the nationality question not by a metaphysical formula which leaves the determination of the nationality question to each of the nationalities according to their whims, but only by means of a well-defined plan.”(p2) The assumption being made is that the role of the Social Democrats would be to have an influence on the question of the character of the realisation of the various aspects of the national question, and so this would imply that the result would be in some sense in the interests of the working class. In this context the aim of the Austrian Social Democrats to establish a democratic federation of nations is supported. Hence the assumption being made is that such a development would be most in the interests of the workers because it implies that the limitations of national separation are overcome by a situation in which the unity of the working class of different nationalities is being upheld. But what Luxemburg does not tackle is the apparent uncomfortable fact that this approach may be relevant for Austria, but it is not necessarily appropriate for the situation of the Russian empire. In this latter context the repressive and exploitative character of the role of the ruling class within the dominant nation of Russia seems to suggest that the aim of national self-determination is quite principled and appropriate. The effective demise of the Russian empire, and the end of the situation of the hegemony of a powerful and oppressive nation would seem to suggest that the result could only be the creation of independent states in which the influence of the workers and peasants becomes enhanced. In this situation the ability to struggle for the aims of socialism would have acquired progressive advance. But if the ability of the Russian ruling class to maintain its empire is maintained then the result of that situation can only be to consolidate and uphold the situation of the subordination of the workers and peasants. Therefore, the demand for national self-determination is part of a democratic revolution which can only facilitate the prospect of the realisation of the aims of the workers and so in this make the aim of socialism become a more feasible possibility. Hence the problem is that Luxemburg seems to be projecting the situation of Austria onto the situation in Russia, but in actuality the circumstances in both instances are different. In Austria the relations between the different nations seems to be based on the limited realisation of some form of political equality and so the result is some sense of inter-national harmony based on the possibility to establish a form of democratic relations between the diverse nationalities. But such a situation is not possible in the political conditions of the Russian empire which is based on the absolute domination of oppressed nations by an oppressive expression of domination by the most powerful nation. In these circumstances it would seem to be logical and appropriate to support the demand for self-determination. In other words, the situations are diverse and so possible uphold the necessity to support contrasting positions. In the Austria-Hungarian empire the aim of federation and autonomy may be appropriate, and indeed this aspect was already being practiced in an effective manner. But in the situation of the Russian empire there is no aspect of genuine political relations between the nations accept in terms of the role of the domination of many nations by the most omnipotent nation. In these circumstances it would seem to appropriate to accept the necessity of the role of national self-determination. However, it has to be accepted that the very struggle for self-determination in these circumstances would be in terms of the process of democratic revolution against the domination of the Russian empire. In these circumstances it would become possible to advocate the realisation of the principles of a federation of the various nations that had constituted the Russian empire. Hence there is no absolute differentiation between the standpoint of self-determination and federation and instead there may be a connection in that the realisation of self-determination then creates the conditions for the development of a relationship between these two aspects. This is because the success of the aim of attaining self-determination then becomes the basis to advance the creation of what would be a democratic federation of nations. This connection becomes feasible because the influence of the working class in this process of transformation creates the prospect for the creation of connections between nations. Indeed, this change indicates that what is becoming feasible is the creation of workers governments in the various nations, and in this manner the prospect of the development of a situation of a federation of similar forms of nations then becomes possible. In this manner there is not a contradiction between the aims of the workers and the aspiration for self-determination.

But instead of this connection Rosa Luxemburg seems to only recognise the apparent distinction between the aspiration for self-determination and the interests of the working class. Hence what is implied is that the standpoint of self-determination and its realisation can only result in the enhancement of the power of the bourgeoisie and so its ability to dominate the workers will have been upheld and advanced. But this not necessarily the situation in the political conditions of the Russian empire. Instead the struggles of the workers and peasants against Tsarist domination means that and national aspirations become connected to the aim of the realisation of a democratic republic which can only express the advance of the interests of the people in general. In this situation the connection of the aim for self-determination becomes closely associated with the aspect of the aspirations to achieve some form of social progress. Hence the realisation of self-determination would be connected to the increased influence of the workers and peasants within the given society. In contrast Luxemburg assumes that the aim of national self-determination can only be realised in terms of the increased hegemony of the bourgeoisie. But this is a false calculation. In other words, the workers and peasants would be the active elements of the national struggle and so they would be in a position to influence its outcome. However, this possibility is connected to the importance of the role of the revolutionary party. If the influence of the Marxist party is limited and insignificant then this could mean that the national bourgeoisie is more able to establish its interests in relation to the national struggle. But this possibility should not result in the rejection of the national struggle because even the development and realisation of the creation of a new nation state dominated by the national bourgeoisie would still be a progressive outcome if it led to the decreased power of the Tsarist empire. What is necessary is to bring about the demise of the reactionary Tsarist empire, and in this connection the advance of the aim of the realisation of national self-determination is an aspect of this process. This seems to be the point not recognised by Luxemburg because she seems to consider that the only progressive struggle is that of the workers of all nations within the Russian empire. This point is not necessarily wrong because this is what happened within the process of the revolution of 1905. But the mass struggles of the workers of the Russian empire could only logically result in the possibility for the replacement of the domination of the old state formation with a collection of new democratic nation states. Hence there was no contradiction between the aspirations of the workers in struggle and the aim of national self-determination. But what was required was that the proletariat of the oppressed nations should also have a programme to connect the opposition to national oppression and he aim of social liberation. But this is what was lacking because it was assumed by Russian Social Democracy that the national bourgeoisie of the oppressed nations would become dominant in the new situation. This was an assumption that was problematical, and this was the point being made by Luxemburg. However, the problem in her position seemed by be that she ignored the importance of the national issue in favour of an emphasis on the role of the social. Such a standpoint was a limitation that also resulted in a one-sided approach that underestimated the importance of the role of the national in the process of opposition to Tsarism. Indeed, this limitation was because the recognition of the necessity to transform the character of the Russian empire was not properly articulated in her approach. Instead it was considered that the most progressive outcome was the modification of the Russian empire and the connected formation of a federation of nations. But what this approach did not seem to realize was that such a possibility could only be the result of the genuine establishment of the situation of the self-determination of the oppressed nations of what had been the Russian empire. The attainment of self-determination would then create the political conditions to establish the prospect of the political unity of what had been the oppressed nations of the Russian empire. But if national self-determination was not realised then this would mean the continuation of the Tsarist regime and in this situation the prospects of the federation of nations would not become feasible. In other words the role of political struggle against the reactionary Russian state could only have the form of the aspiration for self-determination. This perspective did not mean the neglect of the role of the social but instead there would be a connection between these two aspects. Success in the struggle to realise the social aims of the workers would be integrally connected to the possibility to attain national self-determination.

However, despite the problems in the approach of Luxemburg there is an important sense in which her approach is the most principled and therefore should be part of the approach in relation to the issue of the national question. This is because it is in the overall interests of the workers of the various oppressed nations to strive to try and realise a situation of unity in terms of the role of the creation of a democratic federation of nations. Thus, the realisation of national self-determination should not imply a situation of isolation and separation between the various nations. Instead the workers of the oppressed nations should try and realise the development of a process of unity and interaction in terms of the formation of a federation and relationship that is able to connect the role of the national with the aspiration to generate international connections. The repressive situation of empire should be replaced by the creation of a federation and this development should then become the basis to create a new type of international socialist order. In this sense the realisation of the principle of national self-determination would acquire its most progressive aspect in terms of the creation of an international form of society in which the political principles are based on the connection of the role of autonomy for the nations with the role of a unified state. In contrast to this understanding of the character of autonomy, the most ardent advocates of national self-determination, like Lenin, gloss over this aspect and instead are content to merely indicate the progressive content of the aim of the liberation of nations. In an alternative terms it is the position of Luxemburg that supports the view of the Austrian Social Democratic programme when it comments: “Peoples can advance their culture only in close solidarity with one another, not in petty quarrels; particularly the working class of all nations must, in the interests of the individual nationalities and in the general interest, maintain international cooperation and fraternity in its struggle and must conduct its political and economic struggle in closely united ranks.”(p4) In other words, the merits of the approach of Luxemburg is that she has the primary emphasis on the issue of how to generate the international action of the workers of different oppressed nations in order to act together in a collective manner in order to advance the aim of both national freedom and socialism. In this context the aim of national self-determination is modified in terms of the perspective of the formation of a federation of nations that would be able to act together in order to promote the realisation of collective interests. This possibility of a federation would be most effectively realised in terms of the striving to realise an international form of socialism. In this context the aspect of national self determination would be expressed in terms of the promotion of the role of autonomy and international federation of nations. However, the problem is that this perspective may be difficult to realise in practice, and so it may be more realistic to uphold the principles of self-determination, especially if the national bourgeoisie is the leadership of this process of struggle. But if the workers become the leadership of the national struggle then it would become practical to promote the aims of federation and autonomy as being realistic, and which would advance the prospects for the international unity of the working class. Indeed, this is the primary concern of Luxemburg: how to establish the compatible relationship between the national struggle and the international aim of socialism. She believes that she has an approach that is compatible with that objective in contrast to those that advocate national self-determination to the exclusion of the interests of the importance of developing the unity of the workers of different nations. Indeed, this pint is emphasised by the reference that she makes to the support of the nationalist inspired Polish Socialist party for the aim of self-determination. They had a stance that is indifferent to the importance of developing united international class struggle. In contrast to this form of opportunism, she outlines how the principled position is about indicating the connections of the international and national struggle in terms of the role of united class struggle, and in order to facilitate this process the aim should be to uphold the principles of the formation of a state that is based on the connections of different nations who are organised in an autonomous but federal manner. Thus, what is being advocated is the connection of the national struggles to the international aims of the aspiration for socialism. In contrast the most ardent supporters of national self-determination are not motivated in this manner and instead they promote national aims, which implies the formation of a nation state under the domination of capitalism, at the expense of the international aspects of the prospect of the realisation of socialism.

Luxemburg would contend that the dogmatic expression of the standpoint of national self-determination is opposed to the objectives of the approach of socialism which can be defined in the following terms: “In point of fact the political programs of the modern workers parties do not aim at stating abstract principles of a social ideal, but only at the formulation of those practical social and political reforms which the class conscious proletariat needs and demands in the framework of bourgeois society to facilitate the class struggle and their ultimate victory. The elements of a political program are formulated wit definite aims in mind: to provide a direct, practical, and feasible solution to the crucial problems of political and social life, which are in the area of the class struggle of the proletariat to serve as a guideline for everyday politics and its needs; to initiate the political action of the workers party and to lead it in the right direction; and finally to separate the revolutionary politics of the proletariat from the politics of the bourgeois parties and petit bourgeois parties.”(p6) But the problem with this approach is that it is too abstract and dogmatic and is differentiated from the situation of the Russian empire. In this context there is an obvious situation of the domination of many oppressed nations by the reactionary Russian empire and so it would seem that it was in the interests of the workers of these countries to strive for the realisation of liberation from the domination of the Russian state. This possibility would not undermine the attempt to realise socialism because the leadership of the working class of the national struggle could mean that the aim of socialism is connected to this aspiration for national liberation. Hence the view of Luxemburg that an emphasis on the importance of national self-determination would be at the expense of the aim of socialism could be considered to be a dogmatic assertation that is not likely to be realised in practice. Indeed, it requires the conscious role of the working class if it is to become the leadership of the national struggle. Therefore, the problem is not the aim of national self-determination, which is not inherently diversionary or reactionary, but instead the task is to attain the leadership of the proletariat rather than the bourgeoisie in this struggle. The point being made is that the national struggle will occur because of the repressive role of the domination of the Russian empire, and so as a result the situation will be characterised by the actuality of oppression. In this context the perspective should not be to deny the necessity of the national struggle in terms of an abstract adherence to the importance of socialist internationalism, but instead to outline a perspective of the leadership of the working class in the national struggle. However, to some extent Lenin ignores this perspective and instead upholds the aim of national self-determination in abstract and generalised terms. The result of his position is to accept the leadership of the national bourgeoise in the struggle against the domination of the Russian empire. As a result of the ambiguity of his standpoint, Luxemburg would seem to have a valid point that a rigid emphasis on the importance of the national question should not be at the expense of the importance of the primary issues of the class struggle. However, this approach results in a tendency to ignore the very significance of the national question and with the result that it would seem that the issue of the domination of the Russian empire over the various nations is unimportant. What is necessary to achieve clarification in relation to these disputes is to outline how the question of the progressive resolution of the national question is closely connected to the leadership of the working class. The approach of Luxemburg seems to support a form of economism that tries to contrast the importance of economic questions to the role of the political. In contrast Lenin upholds the importance of the political in a one-sided manner and so does not relate the role of the national question to the role of the class struggle. In this context the limitations of both Lenin and Luxemburg have to be overcome.

Luxemburg would argue that Lenin ignores the issue of the domination of the national bourgeoisie in relation to the importance of the national question. The point is that the importance of the class struggle is not overcome by the generation of issues concerning the question of self determination of nations. Hence the question of the struggle of the opposed classes continues and so the task for the working class is to acquire a leading role in the national struggle. Hence the problem is whether the demand for national self-determination is able to uphold this aim or instead is more conducive to the development of the leadership of the national bourgeoisie. Luxemburg would answer that the resolution of this dilemma is to emphasise the importance of internationalism rather than accept the accommodation of the working class to a nationalist ideology and approach that favours the interests of the bourgeoisie. This means that only the generation of class struggle based on the unity of the working class of different countries can create the political possibilities for the success of the working class in relation to its objectives, and in this manner achieve the demise of the Russian empire and the problem of the reactionary limitations of the national bourgeoisie. Hence what is required is a strategy that unites the workers of different nations in terms of common objectives, and on the basis of the development of a united struggle. This possibility is expressed in terms of the aim of a federation which is able to achieve the specific interests of the workers on the basis of the formation of the unity of nations within what has been the Russian empire. However, such a possibility would mean that a unification is achieved between social and national aspirations. The workers would only be able to realise this objective in terms of the capacity to utilise a leading role in the national struggle on the basis of the promotion of its class interests, or the resolution of the national question in terms of the formation of a collection of workers governments. Lenin does not have this type of strategy because in an important sense his conception of the realisation of national self-determination is based on the ambiguous conception of a nation united by its oppression acting in a common manner to resolve the issue of political domination by a repressive empire. Such a standpoint does not tackle the question of the class antagonisms that will still be created by the role of the national struggle. Only Luxemburg seems to be aware of the importance of the class struggle in relation to the struggle around the issue of nationality and so she has a strategy that is based on the continued importance of the possibility of social revolution.

But the question arises: is federation or autonomy sufficient in order to resolve national issues of the domination by the role of the Russian empire? It could be argued that the objective of federation is not adequate in relation to the question of resolving the problem of national oppression by the role of the Russian empire. In this context it could be argued that only the aim of national self-determination can resolve the problem in terms of the effective separation of what has been the oppressed nation from the control of the dominant nation. This is the point being made by Lenin, who considers that Luxemburg fails to understand this point. But Luxemburg could replay and contend that she does not ignore the problem of the oppression of nations by the role of a dominant nation, but that the resolution of this issue does not require the realisation of national self-determination which logically implies the separation between nations and the end of common relations between them. Instead what is called for is a federation of nations within a common state, as has occurred in the Austro-Hungarian empire. Hence the actual important question is how to realise the formation of this democratic federation? Her answer would be that what is urgently required is the development of the leadership of the working class so that it can combine the national, democratic and social struggle and in that manner realise the formation of a type of federated state that is based on the primary interests of the people. This means that the logic of Lenin’s position is that he would have to accept a similar approach if he was to be adopt a principled position that did not undermine the importance of the role of the working class in what was a combination of the national and social struggles. In other words, Luxemburg is aware that the class struggle continues despite the importance of the issue of the domination of nations by a primary nation. Hence it is important to realise the possibility of the leading role of the workers in relation to the task of national liberation, and so this aspect is connected to the social issue of making advances towards the realisation of socialism. But how is this unity of aims to be realised? The point being made is that a situation of national self-determination, which implies a situation of absolute national separation from a relationship with other nations would imply the generation of the domination of the bourgeoisie. In contrast the objective of federation expresses the possibility of a united international type state based on the role of political democracy, and this prospect can be most advanced in terms of the role of the actions of a united and international acting working class. Indeed, this possibility is why the national bourgeoisie prefers to support the objective of national self-determination because that would imply the development of a situation in which a nation is separate from others and as a result is likely to be based on the generation of a domination of a localised ruling class.

In other words, Luxemburg is arguing that the perspective of the national self-determination does not provide a practical and principled resolution of the national question: “It gives no practical guidelines for the day to day politics of the proletariat, nor ay practical solution of nationality problems. For example this formula does not indicate to the Russian proletariat in what way it should demand a solution of the Polish national problem, the Finnish question, the Caucasian question, the Jewish, etc. It offers instead only a limited authorization to all interested “nations” to settle their national problems in any way they like. The only practical conclusion for the day to day politics of the working class which can be drawn from the above formula is the guideline that that it is the duty of that class to struggle against all manifestations of national oppression. If we recognize the right of each nation to self-determination, it is obviously the logical conclusion that we must condemn every attempt to place one nation over another, or for one nation to force upon another any form of national existence. However the duty of the class party proletariat to protest and resist national oppression arises not from any special “rights of nations”….This duty arises solely from the general opposition to the class regime and to every form of social inequality and social domination, in a word from the basic position of socialism. But leaving this point aside, the only guideline given for practical politics is of a purely negative character. The duty to resist all forms of national oppression does not include any explanation of what conditions and political forms the class conscious proletariat in Russia at the present moment in time should recommend as a solution for the nationality problems of Poland, Latvia, the Jews, etc, or what programme it should present to match the various programs of the bourgeois, nationalist, and pseudo-socialist parties in the present class struggle. In a word, the formula, “the right of nations to self-determination”, is essentially not a political and problematic guideline in the nationality question, but only a means of avoiding that question.”(p6-7)

In other words, the approach of an emphasis on the perspective of national self-determination does not provide a conception that can establish a principled and coherent strategy for advancing both the struggle for national liberation of the development of the class struggle. The point being made is that the vagueness of the conception of national self-determination can only represent ideological concessions to opportunist parties that subordinate the struggle for socialism to the issue of the resolution of the nationality problem. Thus, it is being argued that the standpoint of national self-determination is an expression of an acceptance by supposedly socialist parties of the primary importance of the national question, and this approach can only result in a situation of subordination of the working class to the interests of the national bourgeoisie. Instead it is necessary to develop an approach that connects the opposition to forms of national oppression to the objectives of socialism, and this can only have the form of the promotion of the role of the working class that is united in international terms in resolving the issue of national oppression in terms of the formation of a federation that is able to express a process of advance towards socialism. Thus, the aim of federation of part of a policy and revolutionary strategy that connects the issue of the class struggle and the intention to resolve issues concerning the national question. In contrast national self-determination is a vague demand and this suggests that it can only be realised in terms of the reactionary interests of the national bourgeoisie. However, it would seem to be a dogmatic view to suggest that the approach of the aim of national self-determination is inherently unfeasible and unrealisable in effective terms. What if the objective of the federation cannot be realised for important political reasons, should such a situation mean that we should reject the aspiration of self-determination because it has apparently become impractical? Instead it would be more flexible and practical to assess the situation in terms of the given circumstances, and these may show that the most relevant aspiration under the specific political conditions is to strive to realise self-determination. This approach may be relevant in relation to colonies of a great power that are not joined together by a common land boundary, for example Ireland and India in relation to the situation of domination by the British empire. The point is that the possibility of federation may be relevant in relation to the situation of the Russian empire which consisted of a collection of countries that had common land frontiers and were united by a common history, but this possibility may not be appropriate in relation to all types of economic and political circumstances. Instead under specific conditions it may seem to be practical and relevant to support the demand for national self-determination. Hence there is not an absolute approach that is appropriate under what are different circumstances. Luxemburg may have a valid point in relation to the situation of the Russian empire, but this standpoint does not apply in terms of the more complex situation of the British empire which has a more diverse collection of countries under its control.

However, Luxemburg seems to be more correct when contending that there is an intricate relationship between the role of the national and the social. The point being made is that the character of the national question is not differentiated from that of the social. It is in the interests of the working class to be the primary class that attempts to uphold a primary political position in relation to the tasks of realising the issues of the national question in the most progressive manner. But Luxemburg is making the point that this prospect is not advanced in terms of the vague and ambiguous aim of national self-determination. Instead under the political circumstances of the Russian empire, the workers should act in a united and international manner in order to realise a situation of the unity of a federation of nations. If they are disunited by support for the vague and limited aim of national self-determination the result will be the disunity of the working class, and this development will only be to the benefit of the various national capitalist classes. Instead the possibility of the unity of the workers will be generated by the support of an aim that united national and international objectives in terms of the replacement of the Russian empire with the realisation of a democratic federation of nations. Under these circumstances it will be possible to facilitate the common action of the workers of various countries to act together in order to connect the creation of the federation with the objective of the realisation of an international socialist society. In contrast to this principled perspective people like Lenin who support the aim of national self-determination do not have a strategy that would undermine the hegemony of the national bourgeoisie in the effectively isolated national struggle. Indeed, people like Lenin have underestimated the possibility of united and international action of the workers in order to realise the formation of a federation of nations. The common cultural connections of the various peoples of the Russian empire means that this perspective is feasible, and indeed could become the basis of opposition to the domination of Tsarism. Instead Lenin promotes the aim of national self-determination without having a valid and principled strategy that could realise it in the most progressive manner. The result of these limitations can only be to uphold the possibility of the hegemony of the national bourgeoise in the national struggle. This means that such limitations are only formally overcome by a perspective that the national struggle of oppressed nations is inherently progressive. But such a generalised standpoint cannot gloss over the strategic limitations of this formulation of the right of nations to self-determination.

These types of criticisms do not mean that Luxemburg is indifferent to the issue of national oppression. Instead her point is that the aim of self-determination will not resolve the question of the domination of nations in a progressive manner. The political result of the perspective of supporting the aim of self-determination is to justify a situation of the regressive isolation and separation of what have been the inter-connected nations of the Russian empire. Instead of this dogmatic and reactionary standpoint what would be more progressive under the given circumstances of the inter-connected nations of the Russian empire is the promotion of the possibility of the development of a federation of united nations. This would mean that the prospect of political freedom of the various nations would be expressed in terms of what are still united states. In contrast the aim of national self-determination would be a regression in relation to these objectives, and the only beneficiary in this situation is likely to be the bourgeoise and not the workers and peasants. The point is that it is necessary to connect the interests of the workers with the progressive aspects of the national question and this is expressed in terms of the aim of the realisation of federation. Lenin does not seem to have understood these dynamics of the situation and instead has rigidly and dogmatically upheld the aim of national self-determination. But he seems not to have understood the possible regressive and reactionary consequences of this approach and instead has upheld his perspective in dogmatic terms that are not connected to the importance of the prospects of the class struggle. Instead as Luxemburg contends Lenin has upheld the aim of self-determination in absolute terms, and so not understood that under certain specific and particular circumstances this demand may become problematical. Instead it is necessary to differentiate between when the demand for self-determination is appropriate and when it is not. However, the problem in the standpoint of Luxemburg is that she also has a one-sided approach which is unable to recognise when the demand for self-determination is relevant and progressive. Instead she tends to criticise this standpoint in absolute terms. In the name of rejecting what could be considered to be eternal truths, she seems to have rejected the relevance of national self-determination in absolute terms. Bur this apparent standpoint is because the situation of the Russian empire is projected onto other situations in absolute terms. Such an approach expresses a one-sided error that is unable to recognise the importance of the demand of self-determination under certain circumstances.

The point is what may be unprincipled in certain conditions may also be relevant and required in different situations. This point applies to the aim of national self-determination. She comments: “The nationality question……cannot be settled by the use of some vague cliché, even such a fine sounding formula as the “right of all nations to self-determination”. For such a formula expresses either absolutely nothing, so that it is an empty, noncommittal phrase, or else it expresses the unconditional duty of socialists to support national aspirations, in which case it is simply false.”(chapter two p2-3) The view that the conception of national self-determination is inherently meaningless is false. We could suggest that it is reactionary under certain circumstances, but this does not make it nonsense. Instead of this dogmatic rejection of the conception of national self-determination we have to determine under what political and economic conditions it has a progressive or reactionary content. Thus, we have to establish the precise situation in which it would be an aim that should be supported by the working class, or else rejected or seriously modified. In relation to the conditions connected to the Russian empire it would seem that the demand for a federation is both a progressive and realistic demand that would be in the interests of the workers of the different nations of the Russian empire. However, under a different situation it would be relevant to support the aspiration for self-determination and this would be the form in which it becomes possible to overcome the domination of an imperialist and reactionary power and so achieve genuine national liberation.

In other words, the major problem with the approach of Luxemburg was that she was utilising absolutist type reasoning to try and prove the validity of what was an expression of the premises of a relativist approach. Thus, she was denying the validity of national self determination under all circumstances, and not accepting that it could express the required resolution of the national question under certain circumstances. This was the opposite error of that of Lenin, who considered that national self determination was essential in all instances of the oppression of nations. Instead of this polarised approach it was vital that it was understood that in certain circumstances the aspect of autonomy and federation was required, whilst in other circumstances it was still necessary to support the demand of self-determination. The point is that because of the complexity of the political situation it was not possible to elevate the issue of self-determination or autonomy into a dogma with universal application. Instead the question should be considered in terms of what national type demand would uphold the interests of the working class under the given circumstances. But in relation to the question of the character of the Russian empire, it has to be suggested that the approach of Luxemburg was more relevant. It was the aim of federation and autonomy which would enable national liberation to be achieved in terms of the continuation of a large-scale political unit as the progressive replacement for the role of the Russian empire. Furthermore, it was in these terms that it would be possible to establish cooperative relations between the different national entities of what had been the Russian empire. In contrast the approach of Lenin is rigid and dogmatic because it effectively upholds the replacement of what has been a large-scale political unit with a collection of fragmented and small nation states. Such a development can only represent a process of political regression that does not promote the collective and coordinated aims of the creation of a large scale economic and political regime. In other words, the formation of what would be fragmented and differentiated nation states can only be of detrimental consequences in terms of the objectives of socialism which requires the promotion of the creation of a large scale and collective organised type of state. This means that the Russian empire should be replaced by the role of a similar sized but progressive state which would be based on the political principles of federation. But Lenin transforms the limited and specific demand of national self-determination into an absolute, which results in the projection of it onto the situation of the Russian empire in a dogmatic manner. Therefore, the actual specific circumstances of the Russian empire are ignored and so what would express its concrete progressive possibilities for the creation of a genuinely new type of state based on the resolution of the national question in terms of the role of federation, is ignored. Thus, Luxemburg outlines how the criteria that Marx utilised was how to evaluate the progressive aspects of the national question in relation to the given circumstances of the political situation. For example, Marx did not support the demands of the South Slav people when it would mean that the national aspirations of Turkey would be undermined. In other words, there is no absolute criteria of the role of national liberation and instead it has to be evaluated in terms of each specific and given situation in order to establish the progressive or regressive aspects of the national question. The only absolute in this aspect is the question as to how the demands to realise national aspirations can be considered to be part of the struggle for socialism and the liberation of working people. Hence when it was considered that the national integrity of Turkey could be considered to be an integral aspect of the interests of the Russian empire, it was then that the aspirations of its national minorities could be considered in more sympathetic terms. The point being made is that there is not a position on national struggles that can be considered to be immutable and unchangeable under all circumstances. Instead such struggles have to be evaluated in terms of their progressive possibilities. In this context, Luxemburg quotes from the views of Marx who despite recognising that the aspirations of the Czechs could be supported in terms of the aim of national self-determination was still reluctant to support them because they considered that these aspirations were those of a declining nationality. However, Luxemburg recognises that this was an error and that the Czech people had legitimate national aspirations, but such an error in empirical terms does not mean that a methodological flaw had been made. Instead it is necessary to study all national movements in terms of whether they have a progressive potential that can be connected to the aims of socialism. This is the correct point made by Luxemburg, but it does not mean that she does not make empirical errors such as denying the importance of the national aspirations of the Polish people. But even this limitation does not mean that this problem is very important because in terms of the period in which she was writing it was principled to connect the national aspirations of Poland to the possibility and feasibility to realise them in terms of the possibility of Poland becoming part of a democratic federation of the Russian state. Only historical events were to indicate that this standpoint was problematical and that it was more progressive to aspire to realise the national self- - determination of Poland.

Luxemburg makes a valid point when she comments that: “But it is the former position of Marx and Engels on the question of Turkey and the South Slavs, as well as the national movements of the Czechs and Poles, that shows how emphatically the founders of scientific socialism were far from solving all nationality questions in one manner only, on the basis of a slogan adopted a priori. It also shows how little they were concerned with the “metaphysical” rights of nations when it was a matter of the tangible material problems of European development.”(chapter two p6-7) This seems to express the correct and flexible approach in relation to understanding the national question. There was not a single monolithic standpoint to be adopted and instead it was possible to support a diversity of positions in relation to the given and specific circumstances. But Luxemburg, herself, seems to reject this understanding in a contradictory manner given her apparently rigid and inflexible rejection of the aim of national self-determination which could be considered to be progressive in certain circumstances. Instead the apparent dogmatic rejection of this aim could be said to result in the critical support for the role of the Austro-Hungarian empire and to justify an ambiguous position with regards to the national movements of oppressed peoples within this state formation. But this stance does result in various tensions because Luxemburg is able to support the uprising of the Hungarian people against the domination of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1848. Such a justification does not seem to recognise the contradictions in this position because the success of this unrest would have resulted in the formation of a distinct nation state of Hungary in terms of the realisation of the principle of self-determination. But such a conclusion is evaded because Luxemburg merely contends that the discontent of the Hungarian people had a progressive content. But this leaves the question unanswered concerning the fact that the victory of Hungary could only have been expressed in terms of the success of the aim of self-determination under the given historical conditions. Luxemburg tries to gloss over this tension because she implies in a dogmatic manner that Marx and Engels were not guided by the principles of national self-determination in relation tb this situation in Hungary, and instead had ‘a realistic analysis of the movements from a historical and political standpoint.’(chapter two page 8) This conclusion is an evasion because it is quite obvious that Marx and Engels considered that under the given circumstances it was quite principled to support the national aspirations of the people of Hungary. In other words, they did not reject the aim of self-determination under given circumstances. But Luxemburg is reluctant to make this assessment of the writings of Marx and Engels and instead tries to establish a difference between national aspirations and the aim of self-determination. This is an untenable position and evaluation and it seems to have little relation to the views of Marx and Engels. Instead they were quite prepared to support the struggle for national self-determination if it could be shown to have a progressive content. Indeed, this is what motivated their views about Poland. However, Luxemburg cannot recognise this aspect of their approach because of an apparently dogmatic rejection of the progressive possibilities of the struggle for national self-determination.

The basis of the argument of Luxemburg is that it is not feasible and practical to advocate the right of self-determination under capitalism because this approach will not be realised: “Actually, even if as socialists we recognized the immediate right of all nations to independence, the fates of nations would not change an iota because of this.”(chapter 3 p2) And: “In the same way, hopes of solving all nationality questions within the capitalist framework by insuring to all nations,, races, and ethnic groups the possibility of “self-determination” is a complete utopia. And it is a utopia from the point of view that the objective system of political and class forces condemns many a demand in the political programme of Social Democracy to be unfeasible in practice.”(p2) But this standpoint is contradictory because it is not suggested that reforms like the introduction of the right hour day cannot be realised. Therefore, it is accepted that the mass action of the workers can bring about the possibility to realise the aspirations of the Social Democrats, and yet in some mysterious manner this conclusion is denied to the issue of the realisation of national self-determination. This is not a consistent standpoint and it is not explained why it is possible to realise the aim of the eight-hour day within capitalism and not the aspiration for self-determination. What is ignored by this viewpoint is the recognition that it is the very oppressive character of the role of the Russian empire in relation to the situation of the subordinate nations that is creating the political momentum of the demand for self-determination of countries like Poland. In this context the issue of self-determination becomes connected to the development of the strength of the working class in countries like Poland, and so the possibility of national liberation is connected to the realisation of social emancipation. It is also the obligation of the Russian Social Democrats to have the aim of the national liberation of the various oppressed nations of the Russian empire to be part of its programme. Hence the success of proletarian revolution in Russia would bring about the liberation of what had been the subordinate nations of the Russian empire. However, in a sense Luxemburg is right to suggest that the issue of national liberation of oppressed nations in made more difficult by the continuation of the domination of capital. In this context the role of capital is connected to the assertion of the importance of imperialism which results in the undermining of the possibility for the liberation of oppressed nations. But such an awareness should not result in the dogmatic denial of the feasibility of the possibility of self-determination but instead should become the more logical expression of the connection of the success of proletarian revolution with the aim of genuine national liberation. However, it will be argued by people without a Marxist affinity that the post second world war period has led to the emancipation of nations under the world capitalist system. But this development has been of a limited and partial character because the ability of the major nations to remain dominant and so ensure the continual subordination of what are still oppressed nations has been a continuing aspect of international politics. Indeed, this would be the very point that Luxemburg would make in order to conclude that the liberation of nations under the capitalist system is unrealistic. Instead of this rigid conclusion we would argue that the imperialist character of the world capitalist social formation means that the issue of national liberation is still relevant in the present period. Therefore the realisation of socialism does not make the question of national liberation irrelevant as Luxemburg seems to argue, but instead this process of revolutionary change becomes the political basis to establish genuine self-determination in terms of the generation of the ability of what had been oppressed nations to be able to determine their own economic and political affairs in terms of the principles of autonomy. Such a development would not contradict the premises of internationalism because it would be in the interests of each newly liberated nation to establish cooperative relations with other nations in order to enhance the possibility to establish effective economic and political progress.

In other words, the problem with the viewpoint of Luxemburg is that it ultimately seems to imply that even the task of national liberation by the process of socialist revolution is an impractical and irrelevant activity. Instead the international character of proletarian revolution implies that the act of the liberation of nations becomes superseded by a higher form of social activity. This apparently dogmatic conclusion seems to be the result of the overall rejection of the aim of the realisation of national self-determination under the capitalist system, because it become logical to extent this perspective to the issue of national liberation by means of the realisation of socialism. Instead national self-determination become diluted to mean the development of autonomy for what are still regions of a multi-national state. The problem with this standpoint is that it does not accept that the subordinated national peoples may not accept this development and instead still campaign for effective self-determination. The result would be the promotion of discontent within the socialist state which would be characterised by disunity rather than unity. The only manner in which such a problem could be addressed would be the acceptance of the principles of genuine self-determination, but Luxemburg considers that these types of issues has been resolved by the process of historical development: “However, to resume the actual possibility of “self-determination” for all ethnic groups or otherwise defined nationalities is a utopia precisely because of the trend of historical development of contemporary societies. Without examining those distant times at the dawn of history when the nationalities of modern states were constantly moving about geographically, when they were joining, merging, fragmenting, and trampling one another, the fact is that all the ancient states without exception are, as a result of the long history of political and ethnic upheavals, extremely mixed with respect to nationalities. Today, in each state, ethnic relics bear witness to the upheavals and intermixtures which characterized the march of historical development in the past. Even in his time, Marx maintained that these national survivals had no other function but to serve as bastions of the counterrevolution, until they should be completely swept from the face of the earth by the great hurricane of revolution or world war.”(p3) Hence, Luxemburg seems to consider that the character of nations is formed in the feudal past in terms of the creation of various forms of distinct ethnic identity, and so as a result this antiquated state structure is not suitable for the modern requirements of the international development of the productive forces under the tutelage of the system of capitalism. This means that the political role of the nation state is continually contradicting the modern requirements of the economic system, and so the result is a situation of almost perpetual crisis of the structure of nation states. The result of this situation is the generation of war between rival nations, and this problem can only be overcome by the internationalist resolution of these regressive developments by the success of international proletarian revolution would resolve the issue of the anachronistic contradictions caused by the antagonism of rival nations. In other words, it is the character of the nation itself, as an anachronism of feudalism, which is a major problem undermining the possibility of genuine social progress. The only progressive alternative is to end the situation of the self-determination of nations and instead realise the aim of the autonomy of nations within multi-state political formations.

In other words, the aim of national self-determination is not only unrealistic it is also actually an expression of reactionary aspirations. The realisation of the achievement of self-determination can only result in the generation of the possibility of war and conflict, and this means that the attainment of peace requires the reduction of national ambitions to more modest proportions in which the aim of self-determination is reduced to that of autonomy. Only in this manner will such a situation be compatible to the realisation of international cooperation, socialism and the development of genuine harmony. In this context the division between reactionary and progressive nations is rejected because it is considered that the problem is the role of nations themselves and their relationship to the generation of forms of economic and political rivalry. Hence it is implied that the creation of new nations in accordance with the principle of self-determination would not in any progressive sense weaken the system of imperialism, and instead new imperialist nations would be created and the development of the possibility of new wars would become enhanced. What was being suggested was that it was the very character of nations as an expression of distinct communities that led to opposed interests which may result in the possibility of antagonism and war. But what is the alternative to the role of nations? This issue is not addressed by Luxemburg. It would be more practical to strive to realise the progressive possibilities of nations in terms of the success of the realisation of the struggle for the power of the working class and the formation of revolutionary regimes. In this manner what would have been created would be types of nations that would be amenable to the possibility of cooperation and harmony as the basis of cooperation between them because the basis of the antagonism of nations based on the role of capitalism and imperialism has been ended. But instead of making this conclusion Luxemburg outlines in an ambiguous manner the reactionary aspects of the role of nations in historical terms. This point may be true in terms of the role of nations during the era of feudalism and the development of capitalism as imperialism. But such reactionary regression does not mean that the practical feasibility of nations under socialism will come to an end because nations will still constitute the major basis of the realisation of the principles of belonging to a distinct form of territory and the connected importance of cultural identity, and the relationship of these aspects to a given language. Instead of this realisation of the constructive and durable aspects of a nation, Luxemburg can only conceive of its reactionary manifestations in terms of the development of tendencies for expansion and militarism. But the very possibility to generate the success of the struggle for international socialism will also create the political basis for forms of cooperation between nations. This is because in this context nations will become defined by common objectives such as the realisation of the aim of socialism and the advance of world revolution. Hence the expression of internationalism does not overcome the importance of nations and instead what has been created is the possibility of close relations between nations in terms of adherence to common and agreed objectives. There are no social reasons under a situation of the realisation of socialism for the development of antagonism between different nations. Instead they share a sense of solidarity because of the unity created by the necessity to realise the aim of socialism and in order to oppose the antagonism of the remaining capitalist powers. Furthermore, Luxemburg does not consider it important to outline what would be the alternative to the role of nations in an international socialist society. What would be the political and state form of socialism? Instead she is able to articulate the reactionary character of the role of nations under capitalism but is not able to outline in a convincing manner what would be the alternative under socialism. Therefore, she knows what is reactionary and regressive in terms of the role of nations because of the influence of the regressive political aspects of capitalism, but the point is that such aspects could be overcome in relation to the development of international socialism. In this context the problem of the reactionary character of nations could be resolved in terms of the advance of international socialism. In this context the very objectives of nations would acquire a cosmopolitan character and the result is a situation of cooperation between nations that is able to overcome the previous relations based on antagonism and conflict. In other words, the problem is not primarily that of the role of nations and is instead because of the character of capitalism and its imperialist and antagonistic aspects. This is the reason why some nations act to dominate other nations and are prepared to settle grievances in terms of the role of military conflict. This means that the aim should be to overcome the imperialist character of capitalism by the act of international proletarian revolution, and in this manner the role of nations will become transformed. They will no longer be an expression of chauvinism and the aspiration to achieve domination over other nations and instead the class character of the role of the international working class will enable the expression of the role of nations to acquire a connected progressive content. It is necessary to challenge the national chauvinism that occurs alongside the role of nations under capitalism, but this does not mean that the very role of nations should be transcended under socialism. Indeed, it could be argued that it is not possible to end the importance of nations in this context. Instead it is necessary to promote the unity of nations in this context.

The approach of Luxemburg is connected to the interpretation of the views of Kautsky that the system of socialism is based on the transcendence of the role of nations: “Kautsky formulates – as far as we know, for the first time in socialistic literature of recent times – the historical tendency to remove completely all national distinctions within the socialist system and to fuse all humanity into one nationality.”(p5) This interpretation of the views of Kautsky is questionable, but even if it can be considered to be accurate it would be right to oppose it as being an illusory view about what could happen within socialism. It is not possible to overcome the role of the nation state under socialism and replace it with a sine form of international society. This is because people will still aspire to belong to a distinctive community under a socialist system and so will express the aim that this type of nation state should become prosperous and successful in terms of its level of economic and political development. Hence the aim of Marxists should be to realise the emancipation of nations from the forms of domination of capitalism and imperialism. In this context the aim of the creation of one single international society and state is not credible and would actually antagonise the working class in relation to the issue of adherence to the objectives of socialism. Instead of this unrealistic perspective it would be more credible and feasible to try and unite the national and international objectives of socialism in terms of the acknowledgement of there relationship. This would mean that the nation instead of being an expression of the interests of imperialism and forms of economic and political domination would instead become connected to the aims of the realisation of international socialism. Instead of this perspective, Luxemburg has an unrealistic approach that connects the attempt to overthrow capitalism with the end of the role of the nation. If this standpoint did become an expression of the perspectives of the Marxist parties, it would be a policy that would antagonise the working class which still upholds the importance of the nation because of a sense of belonging. Luxemburg is concerned that the approach of recognising the importance of the nation state should not undermine the aims of internationalism, and this is a principled concern, but this understanding should not result in the unrealistic approach of underestimating the very continued importance of the role of the nation under socialism. Indeed, it is necessary to understand that it will be in terms of the role of the nation that the possibility for the advances of the interests of international socialism will occur. The success of proletarian revolution in one given nation will then become the basis to facilitate the realisation of the objective of international socialism because the revolutionary nation will be in a position in which it can promote the development of the international unity of the working class in order to advance the aim of the realisation of world socialism. In contrast, Luxemburg does not outline what would be the state form of a national revolutionary government prior to the realisation of international revolution. Instead she is vague on this issue and so proclaims an abstract cosmopolitanism based on the perspective of an absolute internationalism that aspires to transcend the role of any expression of nationalism, which includes the apparent rejection of the role of a national form of workers state. This is the reduction of the programme of international revolution to the justification of a utopian approach that is not based on actual empirical realities. Hence it is not recognised that the very process of revolutionary change will conform to the aspect of uneven development, or the assumption of political power by the workers in a given nation state before it is possible to acquire power in a different national society. Indeed, the very content of the revolutionary process will be based on the aspiration of the workers of a successful nation state to expand the generation of revolutionary change to other capitalist societies. In this context the victory of the revolutionary process will mean the realisation of the ability of the initially isolated revolutionary society to be able to expand its prestige and influence in terms of the victory of the overthrow of capitalism in different countries. But the very international objectives of the revolutionary process will not mean an end to the role of the nation state, instead the nation will have an indispensable role in the possibility to encourage the further success of the process of international political change.

The problem with the approach of Luxemburg is that she cannot consider that the antagonistic relationship of nations that occurs under capitalism can be overcome by socialism unless the very importance of the nation is transcended. This is an illusory view that attempts to deny the possibility and even necessity of the nation in the political conditions of the generation of the expansion of international socialism. The point is that the working class will attempt to realise its perspectives in national terms. Only the success of the realisation of what is a national revolution will create the conditions for the possibility to propose the prospect of the international development of the what could be a world revolution. But the defeat of the national attempt to realise the power of the working class will also undermine the prospect of the development of an international revolution. Therefore, the working class has to be both a national and international class. Only the success of what is initially a national process of revolutionary change is able to create the conditions that make the generation of international revolution a feasible possibility. Whilst the defeat of the workers in national terms means that the prospect of the realisation of the international revolution becomes undermined and defeated. But this understanding seems to be ignored by Luxemburg because of the generalisation that under all political circumstances the role of the nation is antiquated and reactionary. This is a dogmatic conclusion that seems to deny the importance of the necessity for the working class to aspire to the domination of the nation state, which would then be the basis to advance the realisation of international objectives. Hence, the approach of Luxemburg seems to ignore the importance of political realities that would indicate the importance of the role of the national for the realisation of the process of the seizure of political power. Instead of acknowledging the importance of this apparent political reality she seems to assume that because of the reactionary aspects of the nation this means that its significance should be transcended in the very process of the overthrow of the capitalist state. But in practice the seizure of political power by the working class means the creation of the ability to transform the character of the nation state from its reactionary aspects into becoming a progressive expression of the interests of the working class, and in this manner the very role of the nation state becomes the basis to advance the realisation of the aim of international revolution. In this manner the character of the nation state is transformed into being the basis of the expression of the aspiration to realise the international revolution. If the nation state of the workers government acts in a different manner, in that it undermines the realisation of the aim of world revolution, this would mean that the regime has undergone a process of internal degeneration. This would not be because of the ideology of nationalism but instead would be the result of the creation of the domination of a privileged elite. In this context the major problem would not be nationalism, but instead that an elite had emerged that would utilise the nationalist ideology in an opportunist manner that undermines the possibility of the advance of the aim of world revolution. This is indeed what happened in terms of the development of Stalinism. But this possibility of degeneration because of the pressures on an isolated national proletarian state does not mean that the aim of the seizure of power on a national basis could be avoided. Instead this is the only manner in which the possibility of the attaining of state power by the working class can be realised. Instead the principled manner in which the degeneration of the national proletarian state can be opposed is by the promotion of the aim of international revolution. But this would mean that the very principles of the defence of the national proletarian regime would be upheld in terms of the advocacy of world revolution. Such an approach cannot mean that the importance of the role of the national can be denied or rejected in unrealistic terms. Instead it is necessary to combine the defence of the national proletarian state with the internationalist objective that ultimately the success of this state can only be ensured and consolidated in terms of the advance of the process of world revolution. Instead of this understanding, in a vague and dogmatic manner Luxemburg seems to deny the very connection of the role of the nation state to the possibility to promote the realisation of the aim of world revolution.

This effective rejection of the relation of the role of the nation state to the process of world revolution is connected to the view that the very development of the formation of new nations cannot express a progressive character. Indeed, the aspiration for national self-determination is an illusion because of the domination of international political relations based on the role of the most powerful imperialist countries. Hence: “The “best” national state is only an abstraction which can be easily described and defined theoretically, but which doesn’t correspond to reality. Historical development toward a universal community of civilisation will like all social development take place in the midst of a contradiction, but this contradiction with respect to the growth of international civilisation lies…in the deadly struggle among nations, in the tendency to create -alongside the great areas of civilisation and despite them – great capitalist states. The development of world powers, a characteristic feature of our times growling in importance along with the progress of capitalism, from the very outset condemns all small nations to political impotence. Apart from a few of the most powerful nations, the leaders in capitalist development which possess the spiritual and material resources necessary to maintain their political and economic independence, “self-determination”, the independent existence of smaller and petty nations, is an illusion and will become more so.”(p6) This is an absolute position that contends that because of the strength of the imperialist character of the major capitalist countries it is not possible to realise the success of the struggle for national self-determination of the subordinate peoples. But such an assumption is a dogmatic view that is unable to except that in any circumstances it might be possible to realise the capacity of oppressed peoples to achieve their emancipation in terms of the realisation of the aim of self-determination. Such a rigid perspective ignores the possibility of unity between the people of the imperialist nation and the oppressed nation which may create the favourable conditions to realise national independence. This criticism does not mean that the chances of success of the aims of the people of the oppressed nations are inevitably favourably, but rather that they have the possibility to achieve the goal of self-determination if there is the creation of the conditions for successful popular struggle to realise this objective. Luxemburg may be making the point that the economic domination of imperialism means that the success of the political objective of self-determination will be of limited character. This point is true, but it does not mean that the aspiration for the realisation of a type of national independence will not occur. Furthermore, if there is working class leadership of the struggle of the oppressed nation it is possible that the realisation of the objective of national liberation may have a greater possibility of a progressive outcome. The character of the aspiration for self-determination depends on the circumstances, and so it can have either a reactionary or progressive aspect. But in any eventuality, the struggle for the liberation of what are oppressed nations is not futile, in contrast to the apparent view of Luxemburg. The people of the subordinate country can and did mobilise in a popular and effective manner that is able to realise liberation of the nation in at least the establishment of the possibility of a form of political independence. Such an outcome may not have had a progressive result in terms of the advance of the interests of the workers and peasants of the subordinated country, but at least it was a practical possibility. The generation of a situation of national liberation may not have overcome all aspects of the domination of the country by imperialism, but at least a beginning has been made in terms of the aspiration to overcome the situation of subordination to more powerful countries. In contrast to this perspective, Luxemburg seems to be assuming that only the approach of international proletarian revolution will overcome the continuation of the domination by imperialism of the subordinated countries. But it is this very situation of domination that will result in distinct expressions of the struggle for national liberation before the possibility of world revolution has been created. But instead of this understanding, Luxemburg contends that the very development of imperialism, or the ascendency of a few powerful nations in the world economy has ended the possibility of the genuine national independence of the subordinated nations. This is a rigid understanding that is not able to explain and understand the potential dynamism of the opposition of what represent oppressed nations to this situation of the domination of the imperialist powers. It is very unequal economic and political situation that will generate the forces of the aspiration to overcome the domination of imperialism. Luxemburg may be right to contend that the possibility to end the domination of imperialism requires the act of international proletarian revolution. But this perspective can only be practically established in terms of the success of the initial struggle for national liberation. In this manner the possibility to generate the development of more international and effective struggles against imperialist domination will occur. Instead of this recognition of the complexities of the character of the struggle against imperialism, Luxemburg upholds the rigid conception of the absolute perspective of the approach of international revolution. But such a view ignores the fact that the basis of the beginning of the development of this possibility requires the success of the various national forms of revolutionary struggle for independence and the related undermining of the domination of imperialism. But the rejection of this understanding means that Luxemburg lacks any perspective for the liberation of nations from the domination of imperialism, and instead is only able to uphold the rigid view that international socialist revolution will liberate the subordinate nations.

It could be argued that the continued domination of the role of imperialism and the subordination of the countries of the third world is an indication that the standpoint of Luxemburg has proved to be correct. But the problem has not been the apparent limitations of national independence but instead the fact that the various national bourgeois elites have dominated the process of national liberation and so the social position of the workers and peasants has not improved. This development is an indication that the realisation of genuine self-determination also requires the role of social revolution, and the development of a situation in which the dominant power of capitalism is challenged. The primary problem is not the apparently illusory character of national liberation and is instead about the continuation of various forms of the exploitation of the classes. This means that the aspiration of national emancipation should be connected to the attempt to advance the aims of social justice and the creation of a more egalitarian society. Furthermore, the realisation of this programme would mean that a collection of nationally liberated workers states had been established which could then become the basis of the promotion of world revolution. In contrast, Luxemburg because she considers the very aim of national liberation for the oppressed countries to be an illusion cannot prose anything except the ultimate goal of the international liberation of the nations by the approach of world revolution. This absolutist stance seems to lack any credible perspective for the political liberation of nations from the domination of imperialism. Instead her absolutist approach is a dogmatic standpoint that is unable to accept the uneven and national character of the very role of international revolution. There is also a lack of understanding that the very subordination of nations to the imperialist countries is likely to promote the aspiration for the realisation of national political independence, and this is what happened in the post second world war period. Instead of this awareness her standpoint is based on the implicit assumption that the process of emancipation is dependent on the role of the workers of the advanced capitalist countries. This implicit approach results in a euro-centric view that is unable to comprehend the possible dynamic role of the people of the subordinated nations. Instead imperialism is understood to be an omnipotent system that can only be overcome by the actions of the workers of the developed capitalist countries. The people of the oppressed nations cannot act in an effective manner that would result in the overcoming of the situation of continued subordination to imperialism. In contrast, Lenin upheld the dogmatic view that the aim of national self-determination would result in the inherent expression of the mobilisation of oppressed peoples to realise this aim. This was a different form of dogmatism that did not recognise the complexity of the situation. Instead it was necessary to overcome the limitations in the approach of Luxemburg and Lenin.

In other words, there are two limitations. The approach of Luxemburg does not seem to be able to recognise any potential progressive aspects of the demand for self-determination, whilst Lenin is unwilling to acknowledge any potential limitations such as the problem of the strengthening of the influence of the national bourgeoise of the oppressed country at the expense of the position of the interests of the workers and peasants. What is required in order to overcome these types of problem is to suggest that the aim of the emancipation of nations from being subordinated to the interests of imperialism could be most effectively resolved in terms of the development of the influence of the working class in the struggle for national liberation. Indeed, the ability to overcome the situation of domination by imperialism is connected to the progress of the ability of working people to be the leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle. In this manner the tasks of national liberation are connected to the perspective of the generation of the successful advance of the development of the struggle for socialism. This does not mean that the aim of national self-determination should be defined in conditional terms, it is possible to acquire the political independence of the oppressed nation under the leadership of the capitalist’s, but this development represents a limited advance. Hence the issue of the most effective form of liberation from the domination of the forces of imperialism occurs under the leadership of the working class. Hence Luxemburg made the mistake of indicating that the aim of national liberation was not possible except as part of international proletarian revolution, whilst Lenin upheld the aim of self-determination in an absolutist manner that ignored the class dynamics of the issue. The logical result of Luxemburg’s stance was to deny the very feasibility of a progressive form of national self-determination, whilst Lenin analysed this issue in terms of a conception of the inherent progressive aspect of the role of the liberation of oppressed nations. What could overcome the one-sidedness of both of their perspectives was to reject the aspect of absolutism and to instead accept that the only genuine progressive outcome of the struggle of oppressed peoples required the hegemonic influence of the role of the working class with a revolutionary leadership. In this manner Luxemburg was wrong to define the national struggle as being inherently reactionary and impractical and Lenin was being one-sided when he understood its character as being absolutely progressive and worthy of unconditional support. Instead the ability of a national struggle to become consistently supportable was connected to the possibility of establishing genuinely revolutionary leadership. Lenin seemed to ignore these strategic issues because he did not consider the importance of the political character of the national struggle, whilst Luxemburg seemed to dismiss the very importance of the task of national liberation because this was considered to be an antiquated and unrealisable demand. Instead the application of the permanent revolution strategy of Trotsky seemed to resolve these one-sided problems, and in this manner link the importance of the task of national liberation to the task of social revolution. However, in a specific manner Luxemburg was also right to imply that the continuation of the domination of capitalism as imperialism would undermine the ability of the peoples of the oppressed peoples to realise liberation. Only the overthrow of imperialism in the most important capitalist countries would advance the ability of the people of the subordinated nations to achieve a situation of definitive liberation. However, this understanding should not result in the one-sided error of rejecting the importance of the struggles of the peoples of the oppressed nations as being impractical and utopian. Instead the most coherent and consistent perspective was to recognise the dynamic relation of the struggles of the workers and peasants of both the advanced capitalist countries and the less powerful nations. It was necessary to develop a situation of interaction of the aspirations of the workers of the imperialist and oppressed nations. In this manner the progress of world revolution would be truly realised. Thus, the problem with the approach of Luxemburg was that she did not recognise the progressive potential of the struggle of the people of the oppressed nations. Hence the character of the process of world revolution was reduced in a Euro-centric manner to the role of the advanced capitalist countries.

The differences between Luxemburg and Lenin can be established in the following manner. To Luxemburg the role of nations was generally reactionary because they had been superseded by the importance of globalised economic activity, and this had the form of imperialism which meant that the ability to be able to realise self-determination had become very difficult. Instead there was the actuality of the importance of empires such as that of Russia which was based on the ideology of pan-slavism. In this context what was the most principled demand was to strive to realise a genuine democratic expression of the role of federation. But to Lenin there was two types of nationalism, the first was based on the interests of imperialism and so was reactionary and the second was anti-imperialism of was a striving for the realisation of self-determination. These different perspectives led to divergent political conclusions because Lenin obviously considered that it was both feasible and practical for Marxists to support the aim of national self-determination and in this manner, it would be possible to undermine the domination of the forces of imperialism. But to Luxemburg the only option was to strive to for the attainment of the aim of international proletarian revolution. Until after 1945 the role of nations was limited to the expression of the interests of the imperialist powers, and the only nations that were formed became the expression of the conflict between the various major capitalist countries. Hence, it seemed to be that Luxemburg was right to suggest that the task was to overthrow imperialism via the act of social revolution, and therefore the expression of genuine self-determination was effectively not possible in the situation of the hegemony of the imperialist powers or was only a formal possibility. This situation seemed to mean that Lenin emphasis on the importance of national self-determination was a policy that was ethically principled but had little practical possibility of realisation. But the post 1945 period with the end of empire led to the increasing realisation of the formation of politically independent states, but Luxemburg would argue that the ability to exercise genuine self-determination was limited because of the continued domination of the world economy by the major capitalist or imperialist powers. Hence the major aim of genuine national liberation, in terms of the ability to control of the process of economic and political developments within a nation state required the realisation of the possibility of social revolution. This meant that Lenin’s emphasis on the importance of national self-determination was an abstraction that did not tackle these importance practical issues, which was expressed by the economic and political domination of the world economy by the major capitalist and imperialist powers. This issue could only be resolved in a progressive manner by social revolution, and in order to be truly effective this would have to acquire international dimensions. In other words, formal elf-determination on a capitalist basis only expresses the subordination of the role of the nation to the continuing interests of imperialism. The genuine liberation of nations requires international social revolution, but this implies that a process of change in national terms is only of limited significance. Trotsky reconciles Lenin and Luxemburg’s position by elaborating the possibility of the realisation of proletarian power in the oppressed nations as the basis to establish the genuine ability to realise national liberation in terms of what is an effective challenge to the domination of imperialism. But even the ultimate success of this perspective requires that what is a national revolution becomes developed into an international challenge to the hegemony of capitalism in its imperialist form.

The economic determinism of Luxemburg means that the importance of the role of nations in terms of the importance of the influence of distinct identity, culture, and language, is underestimated because it is considered that such a possibility is superseded by the role of imperialist empires based on the domination of the most powerful nations. This standpoint is unable to anticipate the development of independent nations as the basis of the character of the contemporary world economy. But Lenin is unable to establish how such nations will be able to overcome the problem of the influence of the most important nations on the role of the smaller and less powerful nation states. Instead he assumes that the development of national liberation can realise the possibility of the ability to undermine the domination of the role of imperialism. In other words, there are one-sided limitations, Luxemburg denies the possibility of the dynamism of nationality because of the domination of imperialism whilst Lenin suggests that the political independence of nations is the basis of economic liberation from the domination of imperialism. But both these perspectives are wrong because it is possible to have a situation of formal political independence and yet the situation of economic subordination to imperialism is the general expression of what has occurred. Therefore, the contentious issue becomes to what extent is a nation which is effectively subordinated to the interests of imperialism able to assert an effective political form of independence? In this context is the realisation of political independence merely a formality or the possible basis of the ability to express a distinct economic identity? Lenin’s approach would seem to suggest that he is contending that this possibility is feasible, and that it could take the form of independent capitalist development of what has been the oppressed nation. But In ‘Critical Remarks on the National Question’ (collected works volume 20) he is in favour of the most progressive development of the assimilation and centralisation of nations in order to generate the possibility to realise the ability to develop the productive forces. This would imply that the most progressive situation is the development of federation between what has been the oppressed nation with what has also been the dominant nation. But such a type of federation of logically only possible under socialism, and so this standpoint would call into question the assumption that national self-determination would be generally realised in capitalist terms. Hence there is an ambiguity in terms of his perspectives.

However, he seems to resolve the tensions in his standpoint when in his article: ‘The Right of Nations to Self-Determination’ he contends that Luxemburg’s rejection of the self-determination of nations in relation to the role of the Russian empire means effectively justifying the situation of the oppression of nations. The only manner in which the emancipation of subordinated nations from being dominated by more powerful nations is to realise the right of self-determination. But he does establish conditions in relation to the issue of the progressive character of this aim. The principle of national self-determination might not be advocated or aspired to be realised if the working class considers that progressive possibilities connected wit the formation of an independent nation may not be realised. In this context the working class has the primary interest to uphold international objectives such as the advance of the realisation of world socialism. Thus, the question of the feasibility and advisability of advocating national self-determination is defined by whether this aim is compatible with the objectives of socialism and international aspirations. Hence this approach would seem to imply that Lenin does ultimately support a conditional standpoint that is concerned with whether the aim of self-determination is also compatible with the interests of the working class. Therefore, there is a tension in Lenin’s approach between an emphasis on the unconditional character of the demand for self-determination and the contrasting emphasis on the importance of connecting this aim to the progressive objectives of socialism. But despite these apparent contradictions, Lenin’s stance still seems to be more principled and flexible than Luxemburg’s dogmatic rejection of the progressive role of national liberation. The result of this apparently rigid standpoint is that she adapts to the status quo of the Russian empire. In other words, the absolutism of her standpoint means that there seems to be no possibility to connect the aspiration for socialism with the aim of national liberation. So, despite the tensions in the approach of Lenin it would seem to be more flexible.

However, the major problem with Lenin’s approach is that it is not apparent when it is feasible to advocate or reject the aim of self-determination. If this aim can be defined as being unconditional and absolute it would seem to be the obligation of the working class of the oppressed nation to advocate it in all situations of the subordination of the people by a dominant imperialist power. Indeed, it is the duty of the working class of the oppressor nation to support the self-determination of the oppressed nation, and so this would seem to be an unconditionally progressive aim to be promoted and realised. But how does this perspective overcome the possibility of the adaptation of the working class of the oppressed nation to the interests of the national bourgeoisie? Lenin does not seem to convincingly address this issue, but he does formally insist that the workers of the oppressed nation should uphold their distinctive interests. But this understanding is not outlined in terms of a strategy which would connect opposition to imperialism with the aspiration for socialism. Instead it is assumed that the process of the struggle for self-determination will express a dynamic that creates the possibility to advance the objectives of socialism. Despite this ambiguity this position still seems to be preferable to the dogmatic rigidities of Luxemburg who implies that only international revolution can result in the possibility of national liberation. Lenin does clarify his position in the article: ‘Discussion on Self-determination summed up’ (collected works volume 22) It is suggested that in the context of the situation of inter-imperialist war that the cause of national liberation can become reduced to an expression of the interests of imperialist powers, and so the aim of national self-determination depends on the given circumstances. But the possible reactionary distortion of the aspiration for national independence in these complex circumstances should not mean the rejection of the aim of self-determination which can still have progressive aspects under specific circumstances. But what has become most important is the necessity to strive for international socialist revolution as the most effective manner in which the inter-imperialist war can be ended and the possibility for the realisation of peace. But this understanding seems to undermine the emphasis on the progressive character of the struggle for national liberation. How are these tensions to be resolved?

In the ‘Critique of the Junius Pamphlet’ (Volume 22) Lenin rejects Luxemburg’s view that in the era of imperialism the possibility of national wars of liberation of oppressed peoples is difficult if not impossible. It is the very aspect of the imperialist domination of oppressed peoples that results in the generation of the struggle for national liberation. But this does not mean that such forms of aspiration for national emancipation are generally possible in the situation of the First World War, which is an inter-imperialist conflict that has to be opposed in socialist terms. The point is that the situation has to be understood in concrete terms – there can be wars of oppressed peoples in most circumstances that aim to overcome the domination of imperialism. However, in order to be truly progressive these struggles have to unite the working class of the oppressor and oppressed nations. The strategic issue that is of primary importance is how to achieve the most progressive situation, which is defined by the ability of the working class to become the leadership of the national struggle in relation to the task of achieving emancipation from the domination of imperialism. But even if this development does not occur it is still principled and necessary to support the struggle of the oppressed people against the domination of the imperialist nation. These views are clarified in the thesis: Socialist revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-determination’ (Collected works volume 22) The primary manner in which the issue of imperialist hegemony over the oppressed nations can be challenged, opposed and overcome is by the acceptance of the principle of the right of nations to self-determination. This perspective seemed to be obvious in the era of colonial empires, but what does it mean in the situation in which the political independence of subordinated nations within the world economy has been realised? It would seem that progress in this situation requires the realisation of world socialist revolution, as Luxemburg contended. The point is that Lenin did not seriously study the issue of the character of economic and political relations between politically liberated nations in the context of the continuation of the domination of imperialism. Hence, he does not consider that it was possible to achieve the development of political independence and yet the dominant role of imperialism has not yet been overcome. But Luxemburg makes the opposite error, because her emphasis on the importance of the economic domination of imperialism means that the very possibility of political independence becomes defined as being unrealistic. Hence it is necessary to combine the views of Lenin and Luxemburg. On the one hand Lenin is right to suggest that the victory of socialism would mean that the successful proletarian state would establish the principle and possibility of the realisation of the self-determination of any nations that were part of the society. But on the other hand, Luxemburg has a valid point that this objective should not be at the expense of the integrity of the state, and so the result would be a compromise based on the realisation of a federation of nations. The concern is that the objective of self-determination should not contradict the other aim of upholding the defence of the workers state. The question that needs to be asked is whether the forces supporting national liberation are reactionary and so opposed to the success of the workers state? This was a problem that had to be tackled by the Soviet regime between 1918-23. But the complexity of this issue should not mean that the principle of self-determination should still be upheld in order to overcome the problem of the justification of great power chauvinism. Ultimately the question as to whether the demand for self-determination is realised would depend on the circumstances after the revolution. In relation to the situation of the USSR the complexity of the situation was that Russia had been an empire based on the domination of a privileged country, and on that basis a collection of countries were integrated into a single state, and so the realisation of a federation in these circumstances would express a more realistic and progressive demand. In other words, the effective expression of national self-determination would represent the weakening of the Soviet state, and so would provide encouragement to the forces of counterrevolution. In this situation it was practical and expedient to maintain the countries of what had been the Russian empire within one single unitary political formation. Thus, in practice the approach of Luxemburg was practically realised. But in the different circumstances of the role of an imperialist country with distinct and separate colonies it would be both realistic and principled to accept the realisation of the importance of the principle f self-determination. The point is that the particular application of the principle of self-determination depends on the circumstances under which this aim has to be conceived. But Lenin was right to criticise the view that national self-determination cannot be realised in the situation of imperialist domination. Indeed, this very aspect would generate agitation for self-determination in the oppressed nation. But the most progressive outcome would depend on the extent of the influence of the working class in the struggle for national liberation. The realisation of this possibility is connected to the extent of the significance of the solidarity of the working class of the imperialist nation. The point being made is that the prospect of liberation from the situation of oppression by imperialism is most effectively and successfully realised by the most determined and popular struggle for national emancipation. Tis type of development will advance the possibility of progress towards socialism in both the oppressor and oppressed nation, but the very validity of national liberation is not dependent on the generation of these socialist aspects. Instead the ultimate credibility and justification of the struggle for national liberation is expressed by the general unacceptability of the oppression of nations by dominant imperialist powers. Thus, Lenin does not disagree with Luxemburg that socialism should be the aim of the aspiration for national liberation, but it is not a condition for this type of struggle. But it could be argued that Lenin does not establish why the ultimate progressive aim should not be the realisation of the federation of nations in socialist terms. He is not against federation, but he does not uphold this objective in any consistent and constructive manner. Instead the demand for the separation of nations from the situation of the domination of imperialism seems to imply rejection of the role of federation as being impractical or even over-ambitious. However, this ambiguity is resolved by the fact that the advance of socialism within the imperialist powers would make federation the most effective basis to realise national liberation. This is the very point made by Rosa Luxemburg. It is also the connected view that national liberation would mean ending the domination of imperialism in the only effective manner which is by the process of the realisation of international socialist revolution. Lenin considers that the aim of national liberation is how the process of liberation from the domination of imperialism is realised, but what does this objective mean for the economic aspect of the emancipation of workers and peasants? It could be argued that the realisation of the political principle of self-determination is the basis to advance the realisation of the aim of socialism. However, it could be argued that there is no direct connection between these aspects. Indeed, the realisation of political self-determination has often led to the domination of local elites. But Lenin does make the point that the working class of the oppressed nation must not accept uncritically the leadership of the national bourgeoisie and instead must uphold its distinct interests in the struggle for national liberation. This perspective must involve the development of unity with the working class of the oppressor nation. Hence, it could be argued that Lenin does have a strategy to unite the aspects of the struggle for national and social emancipation. In contrast, Luxemburg emphasises in a one-sided manner the primary importance of the struggle for socialism, and so the role of national self-determination becomes neglected.

Therefore, in the Theses on the National Question Lenin clarifies the role of the working class in the oppressed nation. He does not call for the realisation of the socialist revolution as the basis to resolve the national issue, but he does suggest that the workers should promote the aim of upholding its independent interests, which would indicate some sort of relation between national self-determination and the possibility of progress towards socialism. Lenin’s position seems to be vindicated by the actual situation of the implications of the importance of the domination of the imperialist nations over the oppressed nations and what this means in terms of the possibility of socialism. However, the primary practical aim is the emancipation of the oppressed nations. Thus, he considers that the Polish Social Democrats seem to have a rigid perspective of the call for international socialist revolution as the only basis to emancipate oppressed nations. But the actual history of the continued subordination of what have become formally independent nations would seem to confirm the views of Luxemburg. The actual history of the continued exploitation and domination by imperialist countries of the subordinate nations seems to indicate that the only basis of emancipation is the act of international socialist revolution. Indeed, it could be argued that this position was vindicated by Lenin’s study of imperialism. In his work on imperialism (volume 22) Lenin outlines the process of the development of the domination of the world economy by the role of monopoly capital and finance capital. This situation implies that the only alternative is new forms of the re-division of the world by the forces of imperialism as a result of international wars. But this perspective implies that the possibility of the liberation of oppressed nations cannot occur in this situation unless the very economic and political power of imperialism is seriously undermined by the success of international socialist revolution. This approach suggests that the aim of national liberation of the oppressed nations is the task of the role of international proletarian revolution. But in an inconsistent manner Lenin does not make this conclusion because he makes no strategic assumptions from his study of imperialism. Instead he outlines the principle of national self-determination as a principle and its practical possibilities are not indicated in the era of the domination of imperialism. This means he does not evaluate the contradictions of the possibility to achieve the political liberation of the oppressed nations in the situation of the domination of imperialism over the world economy. However, the empirical fact that formal political independence of nations has been realised and yet the domination of imperialism continues is an indication that the only strategic conclusion of this situation is the necessity of socialism in order to realise genuine national emancipation. Thus, the very study of Lenin on imperialism would seem to confirm the strategic validity of the approach of Luxemburg. However, it could be argued that the position of Lenin is modified by the understanding that the realisation of the self determination of oppressed peoples requires the development of unity between the working class of the oppressor and oppressed nations. The apparent perspective is that the result would be a realisation of a federation of a unitary state based on democratic principles. Hence, we can suggest that alongside Luxemburg Lenin modifies his unconditional and absolutist conception of self-determination and instead connects it to the international objective of a united working class acting to overthrow imperialism in both the oppressor and oppressed nations. This means that whilst there is an unofficial position of support for the political emancipation of the oppressed nations, he also upholds the view that this possibility can only be realised in terms of the unity of the working class of the oppressor and oppressed nations. Ultimately this position is not different to Luxemburg’s view that national liberation requires the overthrow of the domination of imperialism by the act of socialist revolution.

Thus, it could be argued that there are two contrasting perspectives in the approach of Lenin. The first is about the principle of the unconditional aim of self-determination which is not connected to any related objectives and is instead considered to be of an exclusive and primary importance. Whilst the other approach indicates that the possibility to end the domination of imperialism is related to the prospect of the success of the objective of advancing the realisation of the aim of socialism. However, this latter understanding is not connected to the elaboration of a strategy of struggle to attain such an objective. Instead it could be argued that it was Trotsky who outlined the necessary strategy in terms of his approach of permanent revolution, or the leading role of the working class in the attempt to establish national liberation from the domination of imperialism. It could be argued that the perspective of Luxemburg was most compatible with this approach, but her overall approach is based on the importance of the role of the working class of the oppressor nation creating the conditions to end the domination of imperialism. The role of the workers of the oppressed nation, as in Poland, is to support the actions of the workers in Russia, and in this manner a new democratic federation of nations is created. Hence Luxemburg seems to be against any attempt to dismantle the ultimate political structures of what has an oppressive empire, and instead this empire will become the basis of a new democratic federation. Hence the primary instrument of change in this situation seems to be the working class of the major imperialist and oppressor nation. In this context the task of national liberation of oppressed nations seems to be a futile task or is at least dependent on the process of change generated by the workers of the oppressor nation. It is to the merit of Lenin that he seems to challenge this standpoint, and instead emphasises the importance of the liberating role of the possibility of the independence of the oppressed nations. This understanding seems to be an important corrective to the economism of Luxemburg. However, the major issue with Lenin’s approach is that he does not clarify the relationship of the national and social aspects of emancipation. Instead it is assumed in dogmatic terms that there is an inherent connection between the struggle to overcome national oppression and the aspiration for socialism. So, what is ignored by his approach is the understanding that the very emphasis on the role of the national could become the pretext to ignore the importance of social objectives like the emancipation of the working class. Indeed, this was the very concern of Luxemburg, who understood that national chauvinist ideologies could be perpetuated that would result in the undermining of the aim of the liberation of the working class. Hence, she argued that the only basis to oppose this development was to promote the aim of the international socialist revolution. This was an important concern, but it could result in dogmatic rigidities as Lenin was aware. Instead it was necessary to try and establish the connections between the objective of national liberation and the task of realising socialism. However, it could be argued that Lenin did not establish this clarity in a satisfactory manner and so this task was left to Trotsky with his elaboration of the conception of permanent revolution. Hence what was called for was to combine the approaches of Lenin and Luxemburg, but this was never carried out because of the polarisation that was expressed in terms of their contrasting viewpoints. Only with the elaboration of the approach of Trotsky could it be suggested that the political possibility of a type of adequate synthesis was being established. However, this process has never been recognised because Trotsky would consider that his approach was exclusively based on the views of Lenin on the national question. In this manner the views of Luxemburg became neglected, and so the merits of her approach have to be elaborated.

The strengths of her approach are connected to the understanding that the creation of a world economy based on the domination of the major imperialist powers meant that what had resulted was the formation of a situation in which it would be difficult for the subordinated nations to achieve the possibility of liberation from this situation of dependency. This point was outlined in the following manner: “The other principal feature of modern development…..is capitalist imperialism. The example of England and Holland indicates that under certain conditions a capitalist country can even completely skip the transition phase of “national state” and create at once, in its manufacturing phase, a colony holding state. The example of England and Holland, which at the beginning of the seventeenth century, had begun to acquire colonies, was followed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by all the great capitalist states. The fruit of that trend is the continuous destruction of the independence of more and more countries and peoples, of entire continents.” (Chapter three p6) The apparent strength of this position is that it is based on the apparent logic of the process of capital accumulation which is to generate the process of economic development in expansionary terms, which means that the system of production cannot be limited to national terms. The result is that the forces of capitalism within the major countries are able to achieve a situation of domination of countries in which the process of economic development is inferior. The result is the subordination of the economically weaker countries to the interests of what are imperialist powers. The conclusion that is made by Luxemburg about this situation is that the very economically expansionist character of capitalism as imperialism means that the aspect of economic domination denies the possibility of the ability of the pressed nations to assert a potential for independence. This view would seem to suggest that the very aim of self-determination is unrealistic and the only basis for the overcoming of this situation of subordination to the domination of the imperialist nations is by the development of the international act of the socialist revolution of the working class of the oppressor and oppressed nations. In contrast the approach of Lenin would reject the apparently pessimistic and determinist aspects of the approach of Luxemburg. He would contest the approach of economic determinism in her standpoint, and instead contend that the very situation of imperialist hegemony over the oppressed nation will generate the aspiration for national political independence. The domination of imperialism is not omnipotent because of its economic power, and instead this very situation generates the possibility of the development of unrest and opposition to the situation of colonial control of the oppressed nation. This is the very reason why the demand for self-determination is both principled and realistic. In contrast the position of Luxemburg could imply that it was not possible to challenge the situation of the domination of imperialism over the subordinated countries. The logic of her standpoint is the justification of an economic determinism which denies the very possibility of the ability of the oppressed nation to be able to overcome the domination of imperialism because of its superior expression of the capacity to exercise control because of these important factors.

This position seems to be logically and practically vindicated in the period that Luxemburg was writing because of the apparent inability of the various colonial peoples to be able to challenge their situation of economic ad political subordination. But it could be argued that Lenin’s contrasting perspective acquired validity because of the fact that the domination by imperialism of the oppressed nations led to movements for the independence of the various colonial countries, and this very development indicates the aspect of objectivism and economic determinism in the stance of Luxemburg. However, the aspiration for self-determination has not led to the liberation of the oppressed nations because the situation of economic subordination to the imperatives of the major imperialist countries has continued despite the situation of the realisation of formal political independence. This situation is an indication that the perspective of international socialist revolution is the ultimate and most effective manner in which the domination of imperialism can be overcome. Therefore, it could be argued that both Lenin and Luxemburg were correct in a limited sense. Lenin understood that the continued domination of imperialism would generate the political aspiration for the liberation of the oppressed nation. He even indicated that the success of this possibility was connected to the development of working-class leadership of the struggle for national liberation. But Luxemburg recognised the importance of the domination of the forces of imperialism over the world economy. This situation would mean that the possible success of the attempt to realise national liberation could be undermined by the importance of the superiority of the forces of imperialism when compared to those expressing the aim of national self-determination. This problem could only be resolved if the character of the aspiration for national liberation became connected to the struggle for international revolution. Thus, it would seem that the possibility to realise the success of the striving for national liberation would depend on the actions of the working class of the major imperialist powers. The people of the oppressed nations do not seem to be considered as a dynamic and objective social force able to realise the overthrow of imperialism in an effective manner. Indeed, it would seem that even the possibility to end the colonial form of domination is considered to be a futile task. But this understanding was shown to be falsified by post-war events because of the apparent success of the struggle to realise the political independence of what had been colonial nations, but in a certain sense the approach of Luxemburg was still vindicated because of the economic domination of imperialism concerning the character and role of the oppressed nations was still continued. Indeed, in this context the subordination of the newly independent nations to the interests of imperialism was perpetuated. However, it could be suggested that the flexibility in the approach of Lenin was able to explain this development, whilst Luxemburg could not even envisage the possibility of the end of colonial domination. On the one hand, Lenin seemed to have underestimated the importance of the role of economic domination of imperialism over the oppressed nations, but Luxemburg seems to have rejected the very possibility of the struggles of the oppressed peoples to be able to challenge the domination of imperialism. It was Trotsky who seemed to have rejected the limitations of both approaches with his connection of the task of national liberation to the strategy of socialist revolution, and in this manner undermining the importance of the domination of imperialism. Ultimately all of these Marxists underestimated the successful ability of the forces of imperialism to perpetuate their domination over the world economy. This has meant that in an unintended manner the standpoint of Luxemburg was justified because of the very much unexpected failure to achieve the success of international socialist revolution.

What Luxemburg had established was that the very dynamics of capital accumulation had become connected to the development of the colonial domination of what were less advanced and subordinated countries. In this context the very possibility of the political liberation of the oppressed nations seems to have contradicted the dynamics of the process of capital accumulation. These economic dynamics would suggest that the realisation of the political act of self-determination could not be sufficient to realise the possibility of overcoming a situation of subordination to the major imperialist countries. Only the act of international socialist revolution could realise the possibility of ending the situation of unequal domination within the world economy. This perspective has proved to be right but for the wrong reasons. The aspiration for political independence of the oppressed nations was a progressive advance that created the potential for the realisation of genuine national liberation. But the promise of this development could not be realised because the issue of the domination of the world economy by imperialism had not been resolved. The situation was also complicated by the close relations of the national bourgeoisie of the countries of the third world with the interests of the imperialist powers. This point was understood by Luxemburg which was why she advocated that the only alternative was the advance of international socialist revolution.

However, was Luxemburg right to consider that the very aspiration for national self-determination was a reactionary and utopian demand? She comments: “But in this case, “the right of nations to self-determination” becomes a theory of the ruling races and betrays clearly its origin in the ideologies of bourgeois liberalism together with its “European” cretinism. In the approach of socialists, such a right must, by the nature of things, have a universal character. The awareness of this necessity is enough to indicate that the hope of realizing this “right” on the basis of the existing set-up is a utopia; it is direct contradiction to the tendency of capitalist development on which Social Democracy has based its existence. A general attempt to divide all existing states into national units to re-tailor them on the model of national states and statelets is a completely hopeless, and historically speaking, reactionary undertaking.”(p9-10) This seems to be a dogmatic viewpoint because the very development of capitalism as a world economy has been connected to the role of nation states. But these nations have become differentiated in terms of those that are imperialist, and so the most powerful, and those that are subordinated or oppressed nations. Hence the character of the very process of capital accumulation has created the importance of nations, but Luxemburg seems to want to reject this understanding and to instead considered that the less powerful nations are not nations because of this very situation of subordination. Hence the oppressed nations are not nations because of this very condition of being dominated by more powerful and modernised capitalist countries. This view seems to be very dogmatic because it is based on a type of economic determinism which equates the character of the process of capital accumulation with the integration of the less developed nations into the economic and political functioning of the role of the most powerful countries. But in actuality this situation has led to the development of a situation of the oppression of nations which can only result in the opposition of the peoples of the subordinated nations to this situation. In other words the very development of forms of economic domination by the most powerful nations over what are the subordinated nations will result in the generation of the aspiration for self-determination or the aspiration to overcome this process of reduction of the role of the third world countries to the interests of imperialism. But instead of making this logical conclusion Luxemburg is only able to envisage the process of integration of nations within the framework of the structures of the given imperialist powers. In a dogmatic manner it is being argued that the dynamics of capitalism in its imperialist terms has resolved the issue of the role of nations. The smaller nations are effectively being integrated into the character and functioning of the major imperialist countries. This economic dogmatic view is a denial of the actual situation in which the process of the domination of the imperialist powers over the less developed countries can only result in popular opposition and the increased expression of the aspiration for national liberation. But this political dynamic is rejected in the name of the apparent determinist and omnipotent logic of a process of the integration of nations under the auspices of the role of the major capitalist powers. In a sense, Luxemburg has outlined an aspect of the economic logic of contemporary capitalism, but this is a one-sided perspective because of the denial of the generation of popular discontent within the oppressed nations and the resulting possibility of the emergence of struggles for national self-determination. The rigid economic logic of the approach of Luxemburg means that she is apparently unaware of the potential for oppressed people to strive to overcome the situation of national domination by the imperialist powers. Instead what is being propagated is a rigid cosmopolitan view that seems to deny the very importance of the role of nations because of the economic logic of capitalism. But it is this dynamic that has resulted in the situation of the domination of the most powerful nations over the oppressed nations. It would be more precise and less rigid to imply that the struggle for national liberation cannot be ultimately successful as long as the situation of the domination of imperialism continues. But this is not what Luxemburg is suggesting. Instead it is assumed that the very importance of nations is being overcome by the importance of the dynamics of the process of capital accumulation. The approach of economic determinism implies the logical conclusion that the significance of nations is being superseded. But this approach seems to ignore the fact that the very character of imperialism is based on a situation of rivalry between nations, and that forms of reactionary nationalism are utilised in order to obtain support of the workers for the role of the ruling class of the given national society. In this context the aim of Marxists is to promote the approach of international unity between the workers of the various countries, but this does not mean that the role of nations can be overcome by the expression of forms of genuine internationalism. Instead the perspective of socialists should be to create the role of more progressive nations because of the realisation of socialism. In this context what seems to be the opposing views of nationalism and internationalism would be reconciled in terms of the promotion of the objectives of socialism.

However, Luxemburg would consider that this standpoint is anachronistic because the very character of capitalism is superseding the role of nations. She comments: “In a class society, “the nation” as a homogenous socio-political entity does not exist. Rather there exist within each nation, classes with antagonistic interests and “rights”. There literally is not one social area, from the coarsest material relationships to the more subtle moral ones, in which the possessing class and the class-conscious proletariat hold the same attitude, and in which they appear as a consolidated “national” entity. In the sphere of economic relations, the bourgeois classes represent the interests of exploitation – the proletariat the interests of work. In the sphere of legal relations, the cornerstone of bourgeois society is private property; the interests of the proletariat is demands the emancipation of the propertyless man from the domination of property…..In international relations, the bourgeoisie represent the politics of war and partition, and at the present stage a system of trade war; the proletariat demands a politics of universal peace and free trade. In the sphere of social sciences and philosophy, bourgeois schools of thought and the school representing the proletariat stand in diametric opposition to each other…….And whenever the formal strivings and interests of the proletariat and those of the bourgeoisie (as a whole in its most progressive part) seem identical – as in the field of democratic aspirations – there, under the identity of forms and slogans, is hidden the most complete divergence of contents and essential politics.”(chapter four p1-2)

The argument being made is that the very concept and actuality of the nation is an effective abstraction because of these antagonistic interests between the major classes within society. This means that the very expression of capitalism in terms of the role of dominating and subordinated classes within the relations of production implies that there cannot be a united nation in the sense of common loyalty to a given society. Instead the actuality of differences between the various classes suggests that there is not an expression of common identity and shared belonging of a united community that is based on accepted values and beliefs. Instead the various capitalist societies are divided by the role of class antagonisms, and so the conception of the united nation is an ideological myth which is utilised in order to justify the domination of the capitalists over the working class. It is in the interests of the workers to reject the reactionary role of nationalism and to instead advocate unity with workers of other countries as the basis to realise socialism. Only the expression of international class action can liberate the workers of all countries. But the problem with this view is that it denies the importance of the role of the nation state as the basis of any forms of political activity. Ultimately the workers will realise the basis of social emancipation by becoming the ruling class in a given nation state. Only in this manner can the aim of international revolution be promoted. Hence, it is not in the interests of the workers to be indifferent to the political importance of the role of the nation state. Instead because of this dogmatic rejection of the role of the nation, Luxemburg denies the objective and structural basis for the development of the class struggle. People are part of nations, and so this must be the basis of the possibility to advance the interests of the workers and the aim of socialism. Only success in national terms can generate the possibility of making the progress possible that will mean that the realisation of international revolution becomes a credible perspective. Indeed, in practice Luxemburg recognises the importance of nation states like Germany as the structural criteria for the promotion of class struggle. The result of this standpoint was to develop strategies for the success of the class struggle at the level of the given nation state.

What Luxemburg is really objecting to is the opportunist justification of a policy of class compromise that would imply that unity between the different classes is possible because of a common political objective. Indeed, this was the issue when at the beginning of world war one the majority of the Social Democrats supported the aims of the ruling class because of the apparent cause of national unity in a period of crisis. In this context the only principled approach was to uphold the aims of internationalism and to reject any concessions to the ideology of nationalism. But this situation did not mean that the role of nations in the struggle for socialism had somehow become superseded. Instead the nation would remain the basis to begin the struggle for the generation of the possibilities to facilitate the possibility to overthrow capitalism. However, if this perspective was to be credible and principled it would have to be connected to an overall approach of support for the aim of international revolution as the only basis to end the inter-imperialist war. Thus, the revolutionary approach did not mean the rejection of the importance of the role of the nation state but instead understanding that it had an important role in the possibility to promote the realisation of the aim of the transformation of society. But what was also important was to oppose any unprincipled concessions to national chauvinist ideology which could result in support for the aims of the capitalist state in the inter-imperialist war. Therefore, the recognition of the importance of the nation did not mean any justification of ideological concessions to the ideology of nationalism or support for imperialism. In contrast, Kautsky utilised the importance of Germany for the process of the realisation of socialism in order to justify accommodation to the interests of the nation state in the period of inter-imperialist war. The result of this form of opportunism was the rejection of a revolutionary perspective for opposing the reactionary role of German imperialism. Luxemburg reacted to this form of opportunism in a one-sided manner by implying that the very role of the national is inherently reactionary. This meant that the continued importance of the strategic aspects of the nation become to be underestimated in terms of dogmatically applying the views of the article on nationalism to the events in the period1914-18. This failure led to the underestimation of the complexities of the process of revolutionary change in the Germany of 1918. However, despite these limitations Luxemburg still had a greater awareness of the complexities of the revolutionary process than some of her comrades. This is why she was reluctant to support the immediate call for the overthrow of capitalism in Germany in 1918. Instead she understood the importance of the reactionary influence of the Social Democrats and that the working class was divided on the issue of revolutionary change in 1918. What was required under the circumstances was an even greater awareness of the situation in Germany if the aim of revolutionary change was to be successful.

Luxemburg was right in the 1908 article to reject the view of a united nation under capitalism and to suggest that this was an ideological myth. But the ultimate result of this conclusion was to underestimate the importance of the role of the national in the process of creating the possibilities of revolutionary change. This criticism does not mean that Luxemburg neglected the task of writing articles about the process of overthrowing capitalism in countries like Germany. But what she possibly underestimated was the extent of the influence of the ideological view of the united nation, which acted to undermine the possibility of revolutionary change. Instead she tended to make the mistake that her conception of realty was automatically supported by the majority of the working class. As a result, she underestimated the influence of nationalism within the working class. This meant the ideological aspects of the process of revolutionary change was not satisfactorily recognised. Instead she equated the influence of nationalism with the role of the opportunist Social Democrats and so underestimated the extent of the influence of nationalism within the working class in general.

Possibly the basis of the limitations in the approach of Luxemburg is an expression of her historical analysis. This implies that the era of the progressive character of the role of nationalism was connected to the role of the bourgeois revolution when the people of given nations seemed to have been united in terms of the task of the overthrow of feudalism and the establishment of more progressive societies. In other words, the era of the progressive role of the nation was in relation to the role of the bourgeois revolution, such as the French revolution. This development represented the connection of the class aspirations of the bourgeoisie with genuine national progress, and so such changes were supported by the majority of the people. As a result of these developments the character of the nation was authentically democratic because of the connection between the aims of the bourgeoisie and interests of the subordinated classes, and this connection was expressed by the objective of overcoming the reactionary limitations of feudalism. But with the development of capitalism into a more mature and durable system this aspect was ended and instead it became connected to the role of imperialism. The character of capitalism became connected to the oppression of nations and the working class could only advance by ending the system and achieving the realisation of socialism. In this context there is nothing progressive to uphold and defend in the character of the capitalist nation state. The only progressive action of the working class was to unite in international terms to try and overcome the system. This point was generally correct, but the problem was how to effective challenge the bourgeois manner by which the ideology of nationalism was being promoted. To Luxemburg the class interests of the working class would mean that it would inevitably and inexorably act to reject the influence of bourgeois nationalism and its practical expression. But what was not recognised by Luxemburg was that the working class did not consider its varying support for bourgeois nationalism as the expression of the undermining of its class interests. Instead it considered that its class aims were compatible with the expression of what it considered to be a popular form of nationalism. In this situation the role of the various socialist parties was to accommodate to this situation and it ultimately led to support for the first world war. The problem with the approach of Luxemburg was that she could not effectively recognise the influence of reactionary forms of nationalism within the working class, and instead considered this approach to be merely and exclusively the standpoint of the bourgeoisie. Lenin equated the role of reactionary nationalism with the interests of the labour aristocracy, or trade union bureaucracy. This understanding also underestimated the popular character of nationalism, and the related serious ideological role it had in undermining the influence of socialist internationalism. In precise terms neither Luxemburg, nor Lenin, seemed to be able to explain the role of nationalism within the spontaneous ideology of the working class. This limitation is connected to the assumption that the class consciousness of the working class was spontaneously internationalist and so an effective opposition to the nationalism of the bourgeoisie.

Luxemburg considered that the very creation and popular importance of the socialist party was an indication that the influence of the views of nationalism had become contested: “This circumstance shows that the “right of nations” cannot be a yardstick for the position of the socialist party on the nationality question. The existence of such a party is proof that the bourgeoise has stopped being representative of the entire mass of the people, that the class of the proletariat is no longer hidden in the skirts of the bourgeoisie, but has separated itself as an independent class with its own social and political aspirations. Because the concepts of “nations”, of “rights”, and the “will of the people” as a uniform whole are, as we said, remnants from the times of immature and unconscious antagonism between the proletariat and bourgeoisie, the application of that idea by the class-conscious and independently organized people would be a striking contradiction – not a contradiction against academic logic, but a historical contradiction.”(chapter four p1-2) The standpoint that is being upheld is that the very emergence of the role of the socialist party is an indication that the ideological influence of nationalism has become contested. The view that the nation is united becomes a myth and instead what becomes important is the role of opposing class interests. In this context the increasingly class-conscious working class rejects the approach of nationalism because it comprehends that this viewpoint is based on the interests of the capitalist class. Instead the workers as followers of the socialist party adopt the perspective of internationalism and the struggle to transform the capitalist nation state in a revolutionary manner. But this understanding is one-sided and determinist because it is based on the rejection of the recognition of the continued influence of the role of a popular form of nationalism, which results in the accommodation of sections of the working class to the interests of the capitalist nation state. Indeed, it could be argued that this form of nationalism is the most important expression of the possibility to undermine and oppose the influence of Marxism within the working class. Luxemburg’s position would only have credibility if the socialist party was constantly and consistently attempt to uphold the influence of internationalism within the working class. But this is not thee situation because the constant accommodation of the socialist party to the standpoint of bourgeois nationalism. The result of these developments means that the approach of nationalism has not been overcome and instead it has a popular and spontaneous form. The result of this situation was indicated by the support of both the socialist party and sections of the working class for the objectives of German imperialism in the first world war. This development should not have occurred if the views of Luxemburg had been an accurate understanding of the character of the consciousness of the workers and concerning the role of the socialist party of Germany and of other countries. The point is that whilst it was possible to consider that nationalism was a reactionary and anachronistic ideology it still had mass support because sections of the workers considered that national interest was more important than the expression of socialist internationalism.

This aspect was considered to be inexplicable to Luxemburg because she considered that the working class of most nations had come to understand that they had an interest which was opposed to that of the bourgeoisie of their countries: “With respect to the nationality question in contemporary society, a socialist party must take class antagonism into account. The Czech nationality question has one form for the young Czech petty-bourgeoisie and another for the Czech proletariat…..For social democracy, the nationality question is, like all other social and political questions, primarily a question of class interests.”(p2) But unfortunately this optimistic view was a travesty of the truth because the very ideological importance of the aspect of nationality was the major expression of the possibility of collaboration between the classes in terms of the interests of the capitalist class. The actuality of the influence of nationalism had to be acknowledged if this situation was to be transformed in terms of the development of the influence of genuine forms of proletarian internationalism. In other words, an important problem with the standpoint of Luxemburg is that because of the influence of the methodology of determinism it is being suggested that the development of the class struggle will automatically overcome the reactionary influence of nationalism. Indeed, the very creation of the socialist party is an indication that the political basis to overcome the influence of nationalism is becoming very favourable. This means that the only problem is the ideological limitations of some parties like the Polish Socialist party who attempt to unite socialism and nationalism. The assumption is that the ideological limitations of such parties undermine the progress of the working class towards the formation of the approach of genuine internationalism. But this view tries to ignore the importance of the popularity within Poland of the aspiration for self-determination because of the domination of the Russian empire. The point is that the very expression of forms of oppression of nations will result in the generation of support for the aim of national self-determination within the working class. Luxemburg seems to ignore this point because of the dogmatic rigidities in her position. Hence a differentiation between the nationalism of oppressor and oppressed nations is not established in her approach. The point being made is that there could be circumstances in which the aspiration for national self-determination could still be progressive in terms of the role of the political liberation of what are oppressed countries.

Instead of this understanding, Luxemburg can only conceive of a process of genuine national liberation in terms of the realisation of socialism: “The right of nations to self-determination” stops being a cliché only in a social regime where the “right to work” has stopped being an empty phase. A socialist regime, which eliminates not only the domination of one class over another, but also the very existence of social classes and their opposition, the very division of society into classes with different interests and desires, will bring about a society which is the sum total of individuals tied together by the harmony and solidarity of their interests, a uniform whole with a common, organized will and the ability to satisfy it. The socialist regime will realize directly the “nation” as a uniform will – insofar as the nations within the regime in general will constitute separate social organisms or, as Kautsky states, will join into one – and the material conditions for its free self-determination. In a word, society will win the ability to freely determine its national existence when it has the ability to determine its political being and the conditions of its creation. “Nations” will control their historical existence when human society control’s its social processes.” (p 3-4) In other words there is an aspect of the validity of national liberation which is connected to the realisation of socialism. But this recognition of the importance of the role of the nation in the process of the realisation of the process of socialism is not connected in any manner to the justification of any progressive or revolutionary role to the ideology of nationalism. Instead what seems to be suggested is that because socialism is the only basis to establish the conditions of social emancipation, this means that the only principled manner of the ability to realise self-determination is in terms of the generation of a revolutionary regime with the objective of socialism: “But “the right of nations to self-determination” Is only a metaphysical formulation of an idea which in bourgeois society is completely non-existent and can be realized only on the basis of a socialist regime.”(p4) However, this understanding is itself problematical because the actual and most important aim of any revolutionary regime is not the illusory realisation of the process of national liberation, but is instead about the transformation of the relations of production of the economy so that the domination of capital is replaced by the democracy of the workers. In this manner, the aspect of the national expression of the social formation is merely the legacy of the role of capitalism and is not of an importance. What is of significance is the actions of the workers government in creating the conditions for the successful process of transition to socialism.

This approach is summed up in the following manner: “Social Democracy is the class party of the proletariat. Its historical task is to express the class interests of the proletariat and also the revolutionary development of capitalist society towards realizing socialism. Thus, Social Democracy is called upon to realize not the right of nations to self-determination but only the right of the working class, which is exploited and oppressed, of the proletariat, to self-determination. From that position Social Democracy examines all social and political questions without exception, and from that standpoint it formulates its programmatic demands. Neither in the question of the political forms which we demand in the state, nor in the question of the state’s internal or external policies, nor in the question of law or education, of taxes or the military, does Social Democracy allow the “nation” to decide its fate according to its own vision of self-determination. All of these questions affect the class interests of the proletariat in a way that questions of national-political and national-cultural existence do not. As a result, Social Democracy cannot here escape the necessity of formulating these demands individually, and demanding actively the forms of national-political and national-cultural existence which best correspond to the interests of the proletariat and its class struggle at a given time and place, as well as to the revolutionary development of society. Social Democracy cannot leave these questions to be solved by “nations”. (p4-5) Luxemburg contends that the interests and aims of the working class are based on its class standpoint and its connected opposition to the domination of capital. In this sense the importance of the role of the nation becomes irrelevant because the nation is an expression of merely the social context or territory in which the working class organises to defend its aims and aspirations. What is of primary importance is the issue of progress in the class struggle which is inherently of an international character. Therefore, the nation is merely the form in which the activity of the working class occurs, and the question of success in this context is defined by the progress made in the undermining of the domination of capital. But this perspective is based on a contradiction because the very recognition of the national basis of the class struggle means that the issue of self-determination of the nation acquires a proletarian character. Victory in national terms enables the working class to make progress towards the realisation of socialism, and so this means the importance of the national cannot be underestimated. This means the realisation of genuine national self-determination can be connected to the ability of the working class to cerate socialism. This means the perspective of the realisation of national self-determination is not a reactionary digression that can only undermine the ability to realise the objectives of the working class. Instead the working class has to obtain victory over the capitalist class in national terms, and in this manner achieve genuine self-determination. Hence the self-determination of the working class is connected to the genuine expression of self-determination of the nation. In contrast, Luxemburg rigidly defines the character of the self-determination of nations as being inherently in the interests of the capitalists, and so ignores its relation to the struggle for socialism.

Her position would be more consistent and convincing if the emphasis was on the reactionary role of nationalism as an ideology. This is because the major problem for the development of the struggle of the workers is the reactionary influence of the role of nationalism as an ideology that sustains the interests of the capitalist class and so ensures its dominant influence over the workers. In this context the problem is not the aspect of the realisation of the genuine self-determination of the nation in terms of the successful attainment of socialism. This type of national liberation is entirely consistent with the primary internationalist objectives of the struggle to overthrow capitalism. Indeed, it has to be an important strategic task of the working class to realise political power in national terms if the very objectives of the international revolution are to be both advanced and promoted. But the clarity of this perspective is obscured by the apparently dogmatic rejection of the importance of the role of the nation in the strategy of Luxemburg. However, this rigid approach seems to be contradicted when she also has commentated that the working class will resolve the issue of the national question, but this seems to mean merely the assumption of the power of the working class within the given nation state. But such an acceptance undermines the internationalist emphasis of Luxemburg on the transcendence of the national question by the process of proletarian revolution. The point is that it is necessary to reluctantly admit that the character of revolutionary change has to begin in the form of change in national terms. There is no alternative to the aspiration to achieve the domination of the nation state by the working class. Indeed, this would mean that the principles of genuine self-determination would become realised, and so would no longer express an ideological illusion. In other words, the very process of international revolutionary change would take the form of national developments and the realisation of the state power of the workers within each particular nation. This point is accepted by Luxemburg, and yet she still tries to deny its significance. Hence, there is confusion caused by the rejection of the reactionary role of bourgeois nationalism which is equated with an emphasis on the importance of the nation state. Luxemburg is right to contend that the bourgeoisie does not express the will of the nation, but this view leads to the fallacy that the working class should also not aspire to express the interests of the nation. But in pragmatic terms it is also inconsistently accepted that the workers have to aspire to become dominant within the nation state. This confusion can be overcome if it is accepted in a more consistent manner that the objective of the socialist party and the working class should be to realise state power within the nation, whilst rejecting the ideology of nationalism. In this manner the objectives of the role of the national and international can be reconciled.

The tensions in the position of Luxemburg are summarised in the following comments: “The nation wants what the majority of the people want. But woe to the Social Democratic party which would ever take that principle as its own yardstick: that would condemn to death Social Democracy itself as the revolutionary party. Social Democracy by its vey nature is a party representing the interests of a huge majority of the nation. But it is also for the time being in bourgeois society, insofar as it is a matter of expressing the conscious will of the nation, the party of a minority which seeks to become the majority. In its aspirations and political programme it seeks to reflect not the will of the majority of the nation, but on the contrary the embodiment of the conscious will of the proletariat alone. And even within that class, Social Democracy is not and does not claim to be the embodiment of the will of the majority. It expresses only the will and consciousness of the most advanced and most revolutionary section of the urban-industrial proletariat. It tries to expand that will and to clear a way for a majority of the workers by making them conscious of their class interests. “The will of the nation” or its majority is not therefore an idol for Social Democracy before which it humbly prostrates itself. On the contrary, the historical mission of Social Democracy is based above all on revolutionising and forming the will of the “nation”, that is, kits working class majority. For the traditional forms of consciousness which the majority of the nation, and therefore the working classes, display in bourgeois society are the usual forms of bourgeois consciousness, hostile to the ideas and aspirations of socialism.”(p6) In other words the issue of the problem of low levels of class consciousness is equated with the reactionary role of the nation, and so the very perspective of the striving for political power in national terms is considered to be problematical. But in this context the actual most important question is not the role of the nation but instead that of developing principled forms of class consciousness within the workers. If it becomes possible to raise class consciousness in terms of increasing support for the Social Democratic programme, then the issue of realisation of political power of the working class in national terms becomes possible. This seems to be the point generally made by Luxemburg, but it seems to be obscured by the implicit emphasis on the inherent reactionary role of the nation state. It is nationalism which seems to be the major problem undermining the development of class consciousness, but the more precise manner in which this issue could be tackled would be to suggest that it is the influence of bourgeois nationalism that is integral to the undermining of support for the Social Democrats. Hence what is problematical is not nationalism in some general sense, but instead the reactionary role of a type of nationalism that is utilised in order to promote the interests of capitalism and imperialism. In this context it is not unprincipled or inconsistent to elaborate a strategy that aims to achieve the ability of the working class to acquire state power in national terms. Thus, the problem is the limitations in the class consciousness of the workers, and in this context, there is popular support for the aims of the bourgeois nation state. Indeed, Luxemburg’s position is inconsistent because she equates the issue of the role of the nation with the difficulties of developing principled forms of class consciousness. This confusion could be resolved if the reactionary role of the nation was more precisely connected to the domination of capital. It is important to resolve these tensions because there is no principled alternative to the aspiration of the working class to become the hegemonic class within the nation state. In that progressive manner the character of the nation becomes transformed. In a confused manner, Luxemburg seems to be making this point, but the clarity in her standpoint is undermined by the absolutist understanding of the reactionary role of the nation state. It is necessary to outline how the nation state would become transformed in terms of the realisation of the political power of the working class.

In other words Luxemburg is making a valid point when she is indicating the reactionary ideological role that nationalism can have in undermining the class consciousness of the workers, and as a result this situation means that it becomes dominated by the interests of the capitalists. This means the ideological conception of a united nation can only be upheld in terms of the standpoint of the bourgeoisie, and as a result this situation means that the working class remains subordinated to reactionary class forces. But this possible development does not mean that the role of the nation is inherently problematical. The modern state has been created by the modern forces of capitalism which has utilised control of a common territory in order to generate the possibilities for production and trade. It is not credible to try and transcend the role of the nation in terms of applying the principles of socialist internationalism contrary to the apparent assumptions of Luxemburg. Instead it is necessary to transform the economic and political character of the nation by the realisation of the democratic principles expressed by the possibilities of represented by the political power of the working class. In this manner the role of the nation is no longer the expression of reactionary objectives such as the promotion of imperialism and instead becomes the structural expression of the attempt to realise the aims of socialism. Luxemburg is right to contend that the antagonistic character of capitalism means that the view that it is possible to create a united nation around common objectives is not possible, but this does not mean the very role of the nation becomes anachronistic under socialism. Indeed, in an inconsistent manner Luxemburg seems to suggest that socialism is the basis to establish the genuine self-determination of the people. She is right to indicate that the standpoint of a cohesive nation under capitalism is not credible because of the importance of its class antagonisms. But this situation does not mean that the very role of nations becomes impractical, which is the view that she also upholds. Instead it is necessary to obtain the political power of the working class as the basis to realise genuine self-determination of the nation in terms of the application of the role of popular democracy. When Luxemburg criticises the reactionary role of the nation because of the generation of the illusion that it united in terms of upholding common aims, Luxemburg does not consistently outline the alternative to this situation. But this apparent dilemma can be resolved in terms of the elaboration of the understanding that the assumption of the political power of the working class is a national and international social process. Only in this manner can a truly united nation be created that is able to resolve the problem of class antagonisms.

Luxemburg elaborates her views in the second section of her article which is entitled: ‘The Nation State and the proletariat’. This section has to try and establish the political possibilities for the realisation of the success of the objectives of the working class in relation to the role of the nation. She has outlined in convincing detail the reactionary limitations of nations in terms of their role in the consolidation of the interests of capitalism, and so it would seem that the aim of the proletariat should be the transcendence of the role of nations in terms of the establishment of regimes based on federation in which the various nations have the possibility to exercise forms of autonomy. Luxemburg supports the view of Kautsky that the historical basis of nations is established in terms of the economic importance of the character of capitalism. This development becomes connected to the role of the creation of distinct states, or the expression of forms of government and administration of a common territory. In the era of the development of capitalism these states have become the basis for forms of economic and political expansion in terms of the role of imperialism. In this manner it could be argued that the interests of the capitalist class are inextricably connected with the role of the nation state, which is the basis to express its interests. In this context the bourgeoisie has no incentive to overcome the role of the nation state and instead acts to consolidate the importance of this aspect in terms of the striving to uphold the domination of what are oppressor nations over the oppressed. Therefore if the proletariat is a class that has opposed interests when compared to those of the bourgeoisie this must mean that it should have a different approach to that of bourgeoisie concerning the role of the nation state: “The historical mission of the bourgeoisie is the creation of a modern “national” state, but the historical task of the proletariat is the abolition of this state as a political form of capitalism, in which they themselves as a conscious class, come into existence to establish the socialist system.”(The nation state and the proletariat p8) This standpoint is an indication that the interests of the working class are connected to the importance of opposition to the antagonistic aims of the bourgeois state because it is based on upholding the domination of the capitalist class over the working class. But this principled approach does not indicate what should be the approach of the workers concerning the role of the nation. Is the nation closely connected to the character of what is a bourgeois state, or is it possible to establish a more progressive role for the tasks of the nation? Luxemburg attempts to address this issue with the following comment: “The interests of the proletariat on the nationality question are just the opposite of those of the bourgeoisie. The concern about guaranteeing an internal market for the industrialists of the “fatherland” and of acquiring new markets by means of conquest, by colonial or military policies – all these, which are the intentions of the bourgeoisie in creating a “national state”, cannot be the aims of a conscious proletariat.”(p8) This view elaborates the understanding that the character of the nation under the domination of the capitalist class has reactionary objectives such as the justification of imperialism. It is not in the interests of the workers to support these aims in terms of a reactionary conception of the supposedly common objectives of the nation. Instead what is being suggested is that the class interests of the workers is connected to the most intransigent and principled forms of socialist internationalism. But this understanding is not able to establish in a consistent manner whether it is possible to reconcile the role of the nation state and the objectives of socialism.

But Luxemburg does imply the potential for the importance of a new type of nation in relation to the realisation of socialism: “The national policy of the proletariat, therefore, basically clashes with the bourgeois policy to the extent that in its essence it is only defensive, never offensive; it depends on the harmony of the interests of all nationalities, not on the conquest and subjugation of one by another. The conscious proletariat of every country needs for its proper development peaceful existence and cultural development of its own nationality, but by no means does it need the dominance of its own nationality over others. Therefore, considering the matter from this point of view, the “nation”-state as an apparatus of the domination and conquest of foreign nationalities, while it is indispensable for the bourgeoisie, has no meaning for the class interest of the proletariat.”(p9) This is one of the most explicit comments by Luxemburg that is possible to envisage a different and alternative possibility for the role of the nation under socialism when compared to its reactionary character within the capitalist system. Hence the problem with the nation is the manner in which its objectives have become defined by the interests of the bourgeoisie which has led to the justification of imperialism and colonialism. This means that the character of the role of the nation cab become transformed by the realisation of socialism, which means that the aim of the development of a situation of international harmony between nations becomes the major objective. Hence the actual primary issue is not the problematical role of nations but instead the manner in which the actions of nations are connected to reactionary objectives under the domination of the capitalist system. In this context it would seem to be in the interests of the working class to establish the ability to be able to determine the policies of the nation state so that it is able to act in a progressive manner and so advance the realisation of the objectives of socialism. Hence what seems to be implied is that the vary issue of the ability of the working class to be able to create the political conditions for its liberation is based on the possibility to establish itself as a ruling class within the nation state. What has to be overcome is the present reactionary character of the role of the nation state under the situation of capitalism, but this does not mean the demise of the importance of the nation. Indeed, it is vital to struggle to achieve the democratic reform of the bourgeois state in order that this development can facilitate the possibility of transition to socialism. But this very perspective implies that there are important progressive aspects of the role of the bourgeois nation which need to be maintained and extended if the possibility of socialism is to be advanced and realised. Hence, Luxemburg accepts that the character of the nation under the situation of the domination of capitalism is not absolutely reactionary and instead there are aspects of its system that has to be defended and extended such as the role of democratic rights. In this manner the actual character of the nation is more complicated than being defined as reactionary and anachronistic. Instead the bourgeois state is susceptible to the pressures of the working class and in this manner progressive measures can be introduced, and the result of this situation is that the very role of the nation becomes subject to the possibility of progressive change. This does not mean that socialism can be introduced by a process of the introduction of reforms, but it suggests that the nation is not uniformly reactionary and only based on the absolute domination of the capitalist class. Indeed, Luxemburg indicates that the working class can utilise opportunities for education and the development of culture in order to facilitate the ability to realise its objectives within the bourgeois nation state. This also means that the various nationalities within a given state should be able to establish a situation of political equality and the possibility to overcome any tendency towards discrimination.

However, there is a paradox in the position of Luxemburg because she also contends that the general character of the bourgeois nation state can only be reactionary. This point is outlined in terms of the tendency towards the aspect of imperialism in the role of the capitalist nation state. But the point is that the very role of the working class should be in this situation to utilise its social power in order to undermine the prolongation of this type of reactionary policy and to instead facilitate the possibility for the realisation of peace. The point being made is that within obvious limitations the issue of what the character of a state is at any given moment depends on the balance of class forces. This does not mean that the bourgeois state can be modified by means of the pressure of the working class but it does mean that the policies of the state can be altered in terms of the ending of the policy of colonial aggression and its replacement by a modified approach that is based on the importance of the principle of peace between nations. Obviously, the character of the bourgeois state will only be crucially altered by the realisation of the political power of the working class, but until that possibility is realised it is quite feasible for the mass actions of the workers to undermine the imposition of imperialist policies. In this manner the question of the character of the state power is dependent on the balance of class forces. Indeed, the very ability of the working class to modify the policies of the bourgeois nation state is the basis to create the possibility to overthrow that social formation and realise the development of a new type of nation which is based on the principles of socialist internationalism.

Indeed this approach seems to be upheld in the following comment of Luxemburg: “If on the one hand, political independence, i.e., the nation state, is necessary for capitalism and the class interests of the bourgeoisie just because a nation-state is a tool of domination (or control) and conquest, on the other hand, the working class is interested in the cultural and democratic content of nationalism, which is to say that workers are interested in such systems as assure a free development of culture and democracy in national life by means of defence, not conquest, and in the spirit of solidarity and cooperation of various nationalities which belong historically in the same bourgeois state. Equality before the law for nationalities and political organizations, and the assurance of national cultural development – such are the general forms of progress of the proletariat, a national programme resulting from its class position, in contrast to the nationalism of the bourgeoisie.”(p12) Obviously the ability to realise this perspective in general and effective terms requires the overthrow of the bourgeois state and the realisation of socialism. But it is not denied that the possibility to begin this process of transformation begins with the mobilisation of the pressure of the working class within capitalism to try and realise the premises of democracy and cultural equality as the basis to organise the state. Hence it might become possible to create a federation of nations within a capitalist nation state that at least in a limited manner is able to realise the principle of equality between the various national groups. But what does seem to be rejected in relation to the above approach is the practical validity of the separation of what are small nations within a single state. Instead the aim is to realise a federation in which the various nationalities are able to achieve autonomy in the context of the expression of democratic principles by the state. This approach would seem to be feasible in relation to the situation in the Russian empire, but in many instances the realisation of genuine national self-determination of the oppressed nations is the only manner in which the aspiration for political independence of the subordinated society can be realised. Instead of allowing for this possibility Luxemburg seems to consider that the creation of a federation of nations should be a universal principle for the creation of genuinely democratic relations between nations. This is a one-sided view that doesn’t recognise the validity of the right of nations to self-determination. Nevertheless, despite this limitation Luxemburg does acknowledge the importance of the role of nations within the process of transition to international socialism. It would be a caricature of her views to suggest that she is absolutely against the significance of nations within the system of international socialism. Instead there is a contradiction in her standpoint because she does seem to occasionally suggest that the importance of nations would be transcended under socialism and replaced by the application of the principles of autonomy of regions within a single state, and it is also argued that genuine national liberation occurs within socialism.

We would suggest that the tensions in her stance can be resolved by suggesting that the emphasis on the transcendence of the role of nations is not practical. Instead the actual issue is to achieve genuine economic and political equality of nations within a system of socialism. In this context the ability to reconcile the role of the national and international would be realised. In contrast, Luxemburg seems to occasionally imply that the issue of inequality between nations is because of the very reactionary role of the character of nations. This is an abstract and dogmatic standpoint that cannot recognise the importance of the structures of nation states which will continue under socialism. Therefore, the actual issue is how to achieve democratic relationships between the various nations of a socialist system. In contrast, Luxemburg utilises the principle of equality in order to support the formation of federations in which the role of the nation will effectively be superseded. This means that the principle of autonomy will express the demise of the nation state. It could be argued that this could be the aim of a developed communist system, but in relation to socialism the role and importance of nations is likely to continue. In this context the most important practical issue is how to realise genuinely democratic relations between the various nations. Instead of this understanding Luxemburg is projecting the unequal situation under capitalism as a reason why it is necessary to transcend the role of socialisms under socialism. But it could be argued that socialism would not be socialism if it did not realise the principles of economic and political equality between nations. In this manner the task becomes how to achieve this democratic possibility rather than try to abolish the role of nations in a utopian manner. This dies not mean that federations of nations should not be formed, but they should be based on the continued democratic rights of nations to exercise the right of self-determination. The problem with the formation of the Soviet Union was that it became a federation without the right of self-determination. The result was the development of a centralised state in which the hegemony of Russia continued. Thus, Lenin was right to consider that an abstract form of internationalism could become the basis for thee justification of greater power chauvinism. This was the issue that Luxemburg seemed to have underestimated in her approach, even though she was concerned to overcome the problem of inequality between nations. The lack of practicality in her approach could have been resolved with a definite commitment to the right of nations to self-determination.

An important problem with the approach of Luxemburg is that it is based on an emphasis on the importance of the character of the Polish national question. The major view that is outlined is that the character of the economic development of Poland is connected to that of Russia, and so as a result the importance of the aspiration for self-determination is an illusion. But the fact that the aim of self-determination of Poland has become connected to the interests of reactionary class forces does not necessarily invalidate the importance of the aim for self-determination. The point is that Poland was part of the Russian empire and so as a result the political basis of the importance of the aim of self-determination was being upheld in this manner. Hence the reactionary role of various social classes within Poland did not invalidate the importance of the aim of self-determination. Instead it was quite principled for the Polish Social Democrats to call for the unity of the Russian and Polish workers in terms of the acceptance of the principled importance of the aim of self-determination. But it would also be quite principled for the Polish Social Democrats to suggest that principled right should not be exercised and instead the aim of federation of nations should be realised. In this context it would be considered to be an expression of concrete politics to suggest that what is a right should not be expressed in terms of actual policies. But this is not the position of Luxemburg who instead maintains in a determinist manner that the process of economic integration of Poland into Russia means that the aim of self-determination is not feasible or principled. Instead the importance of the international unity of the Polish and Russian workers means that the aim of self-determination is not progressive, and so would result in the undermining of the ability of these groups of workers to unite together in the common objective of opposing capitalism. But in actuality the interests of unity between the Polish and Russian workers requires that the workers of the most powerful and imperialist country recognise the legitimacy of the national aims of the workers of what is an oppressed nation. It is not possible to develop a form of political unity based on the ignoring of the issue of the national oppression of the subordinated country within the Russian empire. But this recognition does not mean that concessions to the ideology of nationalism have to be created. Instead it is necessary to develop the possibility of common action of the Russian and Polish workers on the basis of the promotion of the ideology of internationalism. But this aspect is connected to the fact that such internationalism does not obscure the importance of the objectives of the realisation of equality between nations. In this context the achievement of this aim is related to the validity of the principle of the liberation of subordinated nations within the Russian empire, like Poland. But is also important to recognise that there is a difference between the formal right of self-determination and the actual advocacy of that demand. There may be many important reasons why the Polish Social Democrats would not practically support his demand because of their recognition of the more important priorities of international action for the realisation of socialism. However, not to exercise the aspiration to realise the right of self-determination does not mean that this is not a valid demand. This explains the error of Luxemburg. She considers that unity between the Russian and Policy workers means that self-determination of the subordinated nation is a reactionary view. The result of this standpoint is to define the character of internationalism in terms of ideals and its relation to practicalities is obscured. It is one thing to reject the ideology of Polish nationalism, but this does should not imply that the aspiration for self-determination of Poland is also reactionary. The problem with Luxemburg’s approach is that it is based on a moral ideal, and the complexity of practical realities is glossed over. But Lenin also underestimates the importance of the unity between the Russian and Polish workers which has developed in the 1905 revolution. This means that the question of the character of self-determination could become connected to the realisation of a socialist federation, with autonomy for Poland in that context. Thus there is an aspect of one-sidedness in the approach of both Lenin and Luxemburg, and as a result the possibility to connect the importance of flexibility to their positions is not developed. On the one hand it is not necessary to contrast internationalism with the aim of national self-determination, and on the other hand the importance of self-determination should not have an absolute and unconditional character.

It would seem that the logical position for Luxemburg to support would be that of a federation of nations. But this possibility is criticised in terms of the apparent connection between the aim of federation with the ideology of anarchism. It is outlined that the era of federation was that of the small city states of the period of feudalism, and that this situation has been replaced by that of the development of the role of the nation state under the system of capitalism. Hence in a manner compatible with the standpoint of the contemporary trend called modernism, Luxemburg considers that the period of capitalism has led to the creation of the centralised nation state, and so the situation of the role of decentralised local communities has become anachronistic. It is outlined how the development of capitalism is based on the role of centralised states, which enable the process of united forms of production and trade to occur. The progressive role of these nation states is that they generate the possibility of the formation of an international world economy. These developments mean’s that the very principles and expression of the role of federation becomes superseded: “The general trend of capitalist development tends not only towards the political union of the separate provinces of each state, but also toward the abolition of the separate provinces within each state, but also toward the abolition of any state federations and the welding of loose state combinations into homogenous uniform states, or wherever this is impossible, to their complete break-up.”(chapter three: Centralisation, Federation and Particularism, section two p4) But the problem with this perspective is that it seems that the only progressive alternative to the aim of self-determination, which is that of federation, is rejected as being unrealistic and reactionary. It is considered to be an aim that is only appropriate and principled in periods before capitalism and so has become superseded by the character of economic progress. Instead the dynamics of centralisation has apparently indicated the unrealistic aspects of the aim of federation, and so it can only be promoted by anarchists as an expression of their utopian alternative to capitalism. But this criticism of the very feasibility of federation would seem to imply that the promotion of the objective of autonomy of nations is also to be considered to be reactionary and unrealistic. The only apparent progressive option is to support the process of the centralisation of nations, which would imply that it would be reactionary to oppose the subordination of Poland to Russia in terms of the imperatives of the role of centralisation. In this context Luxemburg seems to support the apparently progressive nature of the role of the centralised Austrian-Hungarian empire and opposes the demands for federation of the various nationalities. She comments: “The Austrian Social Democracy is a determined and open advocate of centralism, a conscious adherent of the state consolidation of Austria and consequently a conscious opponent of any separatist tendencies.”(section three p8) Hence the aspect of federation within the Austro-Hungarian empire is considered to be an expression of the influence of feudal reaction, and not in any manner the justification of the aspirations of the various nations. But the only logical conclusion to this analysis is to reject any expression of the aspiration of national interests within various empires because the political result can only be more reactionary than the present situation. In this context the struggles of the various peoples of the oppressed nations of Russia is dismissed as being reactionary because of the common aspiration for federation. It is concluded that: “The idea of federation, by its nature and historical substance is reactionary, is today and pseudo-revolutionary sign of petty-bourgeois nationalism, which constitutes a reaction against the united revolutionary class struggle of the proletariat in the entire empire.”(section four p6)

But this conclusion is an indication that in the name of proletarian internationalism, Luxemburg is prepared to reject the importance of many forms of the aspirations of national liberation as being reactionary. The only alternative would seem to be the acceptance of the status quo and a resigned acceptance of the continued domination of the role of the Russian empire until the realisation of international revolution occurs. In other words, there would seem to be no progressive possibility of the realisation of any form of national liberation, and that instead the only alternative is the success of the role of international socialist revolution. This apparent conclusion would imply that the role of large states of a multi-national character are both durable and desirable. But this perspective is rigid because the very merits of federation is that it allows for each of the given nationalities of a particular state to be able to establish the conditions for the generation of the feasibility of the ability to be able to define the conditions of their political freedom within the context of the continuation of the importance and significance of the large state. This means that the large state does not have to be dissolved and fragmented into a collection of small national states, and instead the people of the given regions can assert their autonomy in terms of the development of the role of the federation. But Luxemburg seems to deny this possibility because of the apparent rigid connection of the role of federation with the assertion of national separatism. But in actuality the opposite situation has occurred because the very character of federation means that the unity of the state is able to be continued, and yet the various peoples of the state have the ability to be able to assert their autonomy. However, it has to be indicated that this possibility of the development of a federation should not be at the expense of the principles of self-determination. Each of the distinct peoples of the empire should be able to assert their rights to self-determination, and in this manner the options will be that of the aspiration to realise complete independence or to instead accept the possibility of being an equal nation within a federation. The point is that the very ability to be able to assert the ability to realise the aims of self-determination would imply the possibility to have genuine choice with regards to the options concerning the prospects for the nation. Instead of this understanding, Luxemburg in a dogmatic manner seems to insist that the only progressive choice is for the various nations of the empire to remain within that situation in terms of the continuation of the role of a centralised state that lacks the possibility to realise the principles of federation. What this stance seems to ignore is that this conception could become the justification for the continuation of great power chauvinism in a supposedly socialist form. This problem can only be resolved in terms of the acceptance of the democratic aspects of the role of federation or the alternative of self-determination.

However, Luxemburg seems to dismiss these considerations because she insists that the problem of excessive political centralisation is connected with the character of capitalism. Hence it is implied that the formation of a socialist state would resolve these problems, and so in this manner the political character of socialism would realise the national aspirations of the various peoples within the context of the role of a single state. But this is a formalistic approach that is not able to express the importance of the modification of the structures of what have been repressive states that have oppressed the nations within their structures. The point is that national liberation cannot be guaranteed by the formation of a new revolutionary state. Instead the issue of the rights of a nation under a socialist regime can only be expressed in terms of the possibility of the expression of self-determination or the autonomy of the aspect of being part of a democratic federation. Luxemburg may suggest that such rights are part of what it means to be within a bourgeois state, but this is not a valid reason to reject such a continuation of such rights under a socialist regime. Indeed, it could be argued that under socialism the expression of federation or self-determination would become and not merely formal rights. Indeed, the very fact that the working class of the oppressed nations of what has been an empire would obtain the effective right of federation would mean that the people of such a country would become less inclined to realise the objective of self-determination. Instead they would become a cooperative element of what has become a genuinely democratic society. But Luxemburg seems to challenge the credibility of this perspective, because she can only define the character of federation as being impractical and so unrealisable. This is a rigid view that is unable to recognise that under socialism the principles of federation would no longer be a formality, and instead would be expressed by the very role of the popular participation of the people of the various nations of the state in its process of activity and political development.

The standpoint of Luxemburg is elaborated in the next section of the article entitled: ‘Centralisation and Autonomy’. It is outlined how the development of the modern form of the state has the aspect of the creation of the role of autonomy with regards to various functions of local government. The point being made is that the expression of the development of forms of local administration need not be the expression of the undermining of the importance of the principles of the functioning of a centralised state. But what this analysis seems to ignore is the issue concerning the relationship of different ethnic groups within the given state formation. Is the various expressions of the role of local administration an expression of the domination of the central government, which is itself based on a dominant ethnic group, over the various forms of expression of the aspirations of what are subordinated national groups? Luxemburg seems to evade trying to resolve this issue by suggesting that the various forms of local self-government should have autonomy within the expression of the role of central government. The point being made is that it would seem to be logical to support the extension of major aspects of public policy to the local administration in the name of the principles of democracy, and so in this manner the attempt to impose strict and bureaucratic forms of centralisation should be opposed. This standpoint would imply that the maximum expression of the importance of democracy would be exercised by the various national groups within the given state, even if we accept that the aim of national self-determination should not be exercised.

Luxemburg begins to discuss these types of issues in her fifth chapter: ‘The National Question and Autonomy’. It is accepted that the very aspects of economic, political and intellectual activity within capitalism occurs in terms of the structural context of nations: “However, capitalism does not create the intellectual spirit in the air or in the theoretical void of abstraction, but in a definite territory, a definite social environment, a definite language, within the framework of certain traditions, in a word, within definite national forms. Consequently, by that very culture it sets apart a certain territory and a certain population as a cultural national entity in which it creates a special, closer cohesion and connection of intellectual interests.”(p2-3) Hence it would seem logical that because of the national aspects of the process of the development of the capitalist state that the aim is to improve and modify the principles and aims of that state in terms of the realisation of the role of socialism and so what is required is not about trying to establish an unrealistic attempt to abolish the importance of the nation. Instead what is necessary is to establish a situation in issues like autonomy can be realised in terms of the premises of the continuation of the centralised state, because in that manner the aspect of the reconciliation of the role of the local and national would be established in the most progressive terms. This argument is outlined in terms of the view that Poland is a distinct but integral part of the Russian empire because of the aspect of united capitalist development. The result is that the Polish working class as created by this process of economic development becomes the agency of the process of change and the basis to achieve the realisation of autonomy for Poland within a socialist Russia. This standpoint is outlined in the following terms: “Capitalism annihilated Polish national independence but at the same time created Polish national culture. This national culture is a product indispensable within the framework of bourgeois Poland; its existence and development are a historical necessity, connected with the capitalist development itself. The development of capitalism, which chained Poland to Russia by socio-economic ties, undermined Russian absolutism, united and revolutionized the Russian and Polish proletariat as a class called on to overthrow absolutism, and in this way created, under the Tsars, the indispensable preconditions for achieving political freedom. But within this framework and against the background of this general tendency towards the democratisation of the state, capitalism at the same time knit more closely the socio-economic and cultural-national life of the Polish kingdom, thus preparing the objective conditions for the realization of Polish national autonomy.”(p4)

But there is an important contradiction within this perspective. On the one hand the logical outcome of the development of capitalism is that the issues of the importance of national aspirations will be resolved in economic terms in the context of the expression of the aspirations of socialist internationalism. This would imply that the relevance of the role of national autonomy has become anachronistic. Hence the expression of the unity of the Polish and Russian workers would be to create a type of political society in which the issues of the national question are no longer relevant. Instead the democratic character of the society that is being formed would mean that the importance of the national question becomes resolved in this manner of the expression of the unity of the working class. On the other hand, the very importance of the unity of the Russian and Polish workers would imply that the result of this cooperation would be the acceptance by the Russian workers of the realisation of the aim of the self-determination of Poland. Either of these aspects would seem to be the more practical basis of the outcome of the dynamic of the united action of the Russian and Polish workers. Hence if the issue of autonomy is to become important it has to be a genuine and popular expression of the aspirations of the aims of the workers of Poland, and it is questionable whether this objective has this type of credibility. Indeed, we have to suggest that it would be principled for the Russian workers to support the aim of the self-determination of Poland. Indeed, the adoption of such a stance can only generate increased unity of the Polish and Russian workers. But instead of this logical and principled standpoint, Luxemburg is making the assumption that the process of the creation of unity between these two groups of workers is most effectively realised by the adoption of the standpoint of national autonomy. The problem with this view is that it could be considered by Polish workers that the Russian workers are trying to impose a form of the resolution of the national question that would continue to uphold the integrity of the Russian empire in the situation of empire. The only manner in which this type of distrust can be overcome is for the Russian workers to support the demand for the self-determination of Poland. However, the issue of national autonomy could acquire validity and legitimacy if the Polish workers genuinely support this aim. Indeed, the realisation of this aspiration would contribute in a constructive manner to the creation of a successful socialist state of Russia and Poland. Hence, we cannot deny the realisation of the autonomy of Poland within a singe state would have been the most practical and feasible expression of the objectives of socialism. But the problem is essentially political because the Polish people may consider that the only option is genuine separation from the Russian state, even if that society became socialist. Therefore if the issue of autonomy is to become feasible, the Russian workers have to indicate that they do not aspire to the domination of Poland, whilst the Polish workers have to develop a international consciousness that is able to indicate the connection between socialism and the role of national autonomy. Hence the most progressive aspect advocated by Luxemburg depends on the level of class consciousness of the Russian and Polish workers and the issue of the extent of support for agreed socialist objectives. The problem with Luxemburg’s view is that there is not flexibility that is able to outline an ability to be able to respond to complex circumstances. Instead the position is based on a moralistic assertion of the importance of the unity of Russian and Polish workers on the basis of the role of autonomy. This position would be improved if it was defined in more flexible terms. It is assumed in economic terms that the role of national autonomy would enhance the progressive role of capitalism, and so in this manner it should b considered to be a supportable aspiration. But the problem with this inflexible standpoint is that it is based on glossing over the importance of the political aspects of the situation, such as the influence of the demand for the autonomy of Poland on the class consciousness of the workers of Poland and Russia. What seems to be ignored is that because Tsarist Russia is an empire that is based on the domination of subordinated nations, the result will be the aspiration for national self-determination including Poland. In this context the importance of the role of the political seems to be more important than the apparent economic logic of maintaining the territorial integrity of the Russian empire under socialism.

In other words, the major problem with the approach of Luxemburg is that it seems to underestimate the importance of the aspiration for national liberation that will be caused by the situation of the domination of the Russian empire. In this context the logic of the situation is that the development of a popular movement for the realisation of national liberation is likely to occur. Instead of recognition of this dynamic Luxemburg seems to suggest that the role of socialist internationalism is of more importance, and the result of this influence will be the likelihood of the establishment of the autonomy of Poland within a Russian social formation. This possibility may occur if the class struggle is defined by the importance of internationalist and socialist objectives, but it is also possible that what is likely to occur is the development of a national struggle for the realisation of self-determination. However, the rigid approach of Luxemburg does not seem to allow for this possibility, and instead is content to define the character of politics in terms of the unity of Polish and Russian workers in terms of the aim of national autonomy for Poland. But such a standpoint possibly underestimates the importance of the influence of nationalist consciousness within the Polish workers, and this means that her perspective could become dogmatic and unrealisable. Instead Lenin would seem to be more realistic in terms of recognising the importance of the demand for the self-determination of Poland. The point is that what is being advocated at a given moment in time can always be modified under the changing circumstances and so in this manner the demand for autonomy could become more credible in terms of the actual attitudes of the Polish workers. But it will have been the initial advocacy of self-determination which creates this possibility of modification of this demand to the more limited objective of autonomy. This medication will occur because of the changing complexity of political circumstances. Hence the formation of a worker’s state in Russia before the process of revolutionary change has occurred in Poland could create the impetus to modify the national objectives of the Polish workers to that of autonomy. But any failure of the revolutionary process in Russia will mean that the most principled and realistic demand becomes that of the aspiration for self-determination. It will be the success or otherwise of the revolutionary process in Russia that is important in terms of the demands that will be suggested in relation to the national question in Poland. If the revolutionary process had been successful in Poland before Russia, then it would have been necessary to support the independence of a Polish workers state in relation to the continuation of a reactionary Russian state. The point is that it is the complexity of the political situation which should define the character of the aims and objectives that should be advocated in relation to the national question in Poland. However, even if a worker’s state is formed in Russia, which did occur in 1917, it would still be necessary to respect the national aspirations of Poland. This is why it was a mistake for the Red army to invade Poland in 1920 in order to try and expend the role of socialism by military means. Instead the possibility of the genuine expansion of socialism can only occur in terms of respecting the genuine national aspirations of the Polish workers. Therefore, the issue of the character of what constitutes genuine socialism cannot be realised by the methods of military domination of bourgeois nations by what is a more powerful socialist state. Instead the question of the realisation of genuine socialist transformation can only occur in terms of the actual and genuine actions of the workers of any given country, or the process of the fusion of national liberation with the act of socialist revolution. This mean that the possibility for the social liberation of Poland could only be as the result of the conscious actions and interests of the people of Poland, this development could not be the result of a coercive type of imposition into the more powerful Russian state. However, Luxemburg would suggest that the mass actions of the Polish workers was part of the struggles of the Russian workers to overthrow capitalism, and so the result of this process would be the realisation of the autonomy of Poland within the Russian state. This point is true, but it would still be the voluntary decision of the Polish workers to form a state that was part of a federation with Russia. This would mean that in these terms the principles of national self-determination was still being exercised in terms of the realisation of the objectives of national autonomy

The standpoint that Luxemburg is indicating is that the development of autonomy is in accordance with the aims and interests of the capitalist class, and so in this manner this means that the most progressive form of political system has been established. This situation is an indication that the expression of the interests of the bourgeoisie is also in accordance with the aspirations of the working class because the realisation of the most progressive type of political system can only advance the possibility to generate the conditions for the realisation of socialism. Hence, the establishment of schools and forms of local government will also facilitate the ability of the workers to acquire influence over the role and character of the type of democratic society that is being established. In this context the ability and capacity of the workers to engage in class struggle because of the democratic character of the role of autonomy is an expression of the fact that this form of political society is that which is most suitable for the development of the class struggle and the possibility for socialism: “However, precisely for this reason, autonomy is an indispensable class need of the Polish proletariat. The riper the bourgeois institutions grow, the deeper they penetrate the social functions, the more ground they cover within the variegated intellectual and aesthetic sphere, the broader grows the battlefield and the bigger the number of firing lines wherefrom the proletariat conducts the class struggle. The more unrestrictedly and efficiently the development of bourgeois society proceeds, the more courageously and surely advances the consciousness, political maturity, and unification of the proletariat as a class.”(National Question and Autonomy p6) In other words the issue as to the merits of the contrasting perspectives of either national self-determination or autonomy is dependent on the question as to what is able to advance the class interests of the working class in the most effective manner. Luxemburg assumes that the approach of autonomy is what is in the interests of the proletariat in terms of the possibility to advance the ability of the workers to be able to exert an influence over the character of society. Thus, the role of autonomy is what is able to express the possibility for the situation to be most favourable to the working class within what is still a society dominated by the capitalist class. But it could be suggested in contrasting terms that it is quite possible that with a situation of the realisation of self-determination of the oppressed nations that this development could result in an outcome that was most advantageous to the working class. Indeed, it could be indicated that a situation of autonomy could be the justification and expression of the continued domination of society by what is the most powerful capitalist class within the given society. Thus, autonomy could be the alternative to a revolutionary process of change that can only be based on the expression of the principles of self-determination. Indeed, there is no reason to consider that national self-determination should undermine the importance of the influence of the working class within the process of change. The point being made is that the actual perspective that should be adopted should be flexible because in certain circumstances it may be that the approach of autonomy is more conducive to the expression of the interests of the working class, and in other situations it may be necessary to promote the aim of self-determination. In other words, there is no absolutes and so the perspective that has to be adopted depends on what could be diverse and changing political circumstances. Thus, it may have been necessary to support the autonomy of Poland in the situation of the Russian revolution of 1905, and to then change this position in 1917 when it became apparent that the empire was dissolving and so the aim of the self-determination of Poland was more feasible and practical. The point what is the interests of the working class, in terms of the development of the interests of the working class within society, depends on the actual circumstances. This means that it is not feasible to outline a perspective and support for either the demand of autonomy or self-determination that is abstracted from a reasonable and principled understanding of the circumstances. Instead the aim that should be adopted by the revolutionary forces should depend on what is in the interests of the national and international working class at any given moment in time.

This criticism of Luxemburg for apparent dogmatism can also be applied to the standpoint of Lenin. He seems to imply in his approach that the aim of self-determination of the oppressed nations is applicable in all circumstances. But this ignores the possibility to establish what would be a more progressive outcome of opposition to the situation of the domination of nations by the most powerful country which is the realisation of autonomy. The establishment of self-determination implies that the given nation is isolated from having any genuine economic and political relations with other countries, whilst in terms of the realisation of autonomy the given nation would have a close economic and political relationship with other countries. Hence the possibility of autonomy is more progressive and a preferable outcome that is able to establish the creation of inter-connections between the workers of the various nationalities of the given state. In other words, even if the domination of capitalism is still present, the situation of autonomy means that cooperative and inter-connected relations between the workers of several nations can be established in the situation of autonomy. Such a possibility is not guaranteed if the workers are isolated by the process of separation and isolation implied by the realisation of self-determination. This point is made by Luxemburg when she comments: “The Polish proletariat needs for its class struggle all the components of which a spiritual culture is made; primarily its interests, essentially based on the solidarity of nations and striving toward it, require the elimination of national oppression, and guarantees against such oppression worked out in the course of social development. Moreover, a normal, broad, and unrestricted cultural life of the country is just as indispensable for the development of the proletariat’s class struggle as for the existence of bourgeois society itself.”(P6-7) In other words, the merits of Luxemburg’s standpoint is that the emphasis is about the conditions and circumstances in which the realisation of the progress of the aim of national liberation is connected to the ability and capacity of the workers to make progress in the class struggle. The end of the domination of the Russian empire will have the most progressive outcome if the national aspirations of the Polish workers is connected to the realisation of a situation of autonomy in what is a democratic federation of nations. It is quite possible that the domination of capital will still occur in this situation, but this will be expressed by the increasing influence of the workers of the given nations of what has been the Russian empire. The effective realisation of a democratic revolution, in terms of the expression of the principle of autonomy, is an indication that the balance of class forces has become favourable to the workers of what has been the Russian empire. This is why Luxemburg comments that: “National autonomy has the same aims as a re contained in the political programme of the Polish proletariat: the overthrow of absolutism and the achievement of political freedom in the country at large; this is but part of the programme resulting both from the progressive trends of capitalist development and from the class interests of the proletariat.”(p7) Thus the achievement of autonomy is connected to the advance of what is a democratic revolution that will facilitate the process of the creation of a balance of class forces that is favourable to the working class, even if the forces of capital are still dominant. In contrast, the approach of Lenin concerning the objective of the aim of national self-determination does not seem to have a similar strategic clarity. Instead it is posed as an absolute demand that is not explicit about the role of the working class in the process of its realisation. This means that the perspective of Lenin’s aim of self-determination becomes reduced to a moral imperative, whilst Luxemburg’s aspiration for autonomy is connected to the issue of progress in the class struggle. Luxemburg is explicitly suggesting that autonomy will only be realised if the working class is able to make advances in its influence within society. This is why this aim is connected to the overall strategy of the aspiration for proletarian revolution. In contrast, Lenin is vague about the strategic implications of his demand for the realisation of self-determination. Luxemburg’s approach could be said to be dogmatic, but it is still strategically more profound than the standpoint of Lenin.

The point being made is that Luxemburg is outlining an aim in relation to the national question for the working class to aspire to realise because it is in its primary interests to achieve. This does not mean that socialism is the only expression of this aim because it may only be practically possible to attain autonomy within the context of the continuation of capitalism and the domination of the bourgeoisie. However, even such a limited achievement will still be in the interests of the workers because it represents a situation in which the balance of forces will become more favourable for the process of transition to socialism. Hence the realisation of autonomy is accompanied by the development of a democratic republic in which the possibility to advance the interests of the workers becomes more favourable, and in this manner, it is possible to achieve a situation of transition to socialism. In contrast, Lenin does not outline the aim of national self-determination in similar strategic terms. Instead it is only outlined as a general principle to be realised, and the issue of the balance of class forces in this context is not discussed. But Luxemburg is outlining a process of transition to socialism via the realisation of the possibility of national autonomy. This is an aim of the working class within the context of the situation of the oppression of nations which is realised will enhance the ability of the oppressed nations of a multi-national state to be able to realise their political emancipation and so overcome the situation of the oppression of nations. Such a development is based on the attainment of a democratic revolution which is able to realise the process of the freedom of the various nations in terms of the continuation of what is a multi-national state, and so the drastic necessity of national self-determination or separation will become superfluous. However, such a approach could also be said to be rigid because it does not indicate the situations in which the realisation of self-determination or a process of separation from the dominant state is the only manner in which the aim of the liberation of the oppressed nation is the only manner in which emancipation from the domination of the major power can be achieved. So, in a certain sense both Luxemburg and Lenin are right. In general terms the realisation of autonomy may be the most progressive manner in which national liberation of the oppressed nation can be achieved, and in terms that uphold the interests of the workers in the creation of a democratic type of society. But Lenin is also right to emphasise the aim of self-determination because it may be that separation from the major imperialist power is the only effective manner in which national liberation can be achieved. The point is that the strategic option that should be advocated depends on the character of the circumstances, and so there is a necessity to have a certain flexibility in relation to the issue of strategic options. But both Lenin and Luxemburg seemed to have been dogmatic in terms of their national aims, and so Lenin considered that only self-determination was the manner in which the end of the domination of the major power could be realised, and in contrast Luxemburg considers that autonomy is the only progressive approach in which the aim of national liberation can be realised in terms that are favourable to the working class. In a sense Luxemburg’s approach is superior because she is the only person who outlined in detailed terms the reasons why autonomy is an advance for the working class. But this means that in a dogmatic manner she applies the situation of Poland in universal terms to other situations. However, colonies of the imperialist powers could not realise the process of autonomy and instead their interests would be advanced by a process of economic and political separation from the imperialist power. But in terms of the Russian empire it would be transformed in a democratic manner by the realisation of autonomy, and this would be connected to the advance of the interests of the working class who would have an important influence in the character of the process of transformation of what is a multi-national state. However, Luxemburg did not anticipate what should be the aims in terms of the national question if Russia became a revolutionary state. Nevertheless, it could be argued that autonomy would have been a principled and effective expression of the ability to create a genuine society of equal nations. Instead the Bolsheviks upheld the domination of the Russian state in terms of the formal adherence to the aim of self-determination. This development was an indication that the prospect of autonomy in terms of the continuation of the connections of the various nations within one state would have been a more progressive option.

Luxemburg does not seem to strengthen her approach when she concludes her article by apparently rejecting the possibility of the autonomy of what could be considered to be the small nations of the Russian empire. Therefore, it would seem that only the large and more advanced nations like the Ukraine and Poland are suitable for the process of the establishment of autonomy. This would seem to be a dogmatic view that is based on the determinist understanding that only the various nations with a sophisticated level of economic and political development are suitable for becoming an expression of the criteria of autonomy. Such a dogmatic view has to be rejected and instead it is a necessary to develop a more flexible conception of what constitutes a nation, such as a distinct territory, common culture and language, and the ability to define itself in a manner that is differentiated from other nations. However, it would be a regressive process for the various nations of what has been the Russian empire to aspire to achieve self-determination or the establishment of a process of separation from the other nations. Instead Luxemburg seems to be right that the most progressive option would have been to establish a situation of autonomy within what has been the Russian empire, and which has now become a revolutionary state. In this manner the distinct culture and aims of the given nations would have been progressed in terms of the facilitating of what has become more democratic and economically beneficial connections between the nationalities. In other words, autonomy was a progressive option that was more rational and efficient than the situation of the attainment of separation via the principle of self-determination. The Bolsheviks reluctantly recognised this situation, but this was based on the rejection of the principles of autonomy and instead imposed the centralisation of the dominant Russian state. This meant that the issue of national oppression was not resolved in a progressive manner. The reactionary limitations of the approach of the Bolsheviks was an indication of the merits of the standpoint of Luxemburg. If her approach had been applied in revolutionary Russia the aims of the various nationalities could have been reconciled with the objectives of the major national state. But the problem was that the Bolsheviks could not recognise the necessity to modify their position on the national question, and so relate it to the specific circumstances of what had been the Russian empire. In this context the approach of Luxemburg was superior despite its dogmatic flaws. However, the limitations in her position has led it to be neglected. It is time to reject this indifference and instead attempt to re-elaborate the merits of her position.