



Disability: Leadership, Resistance and Culture

DISABLED LEADERS

Rozalia Luksenburg (1871-1919) was born in Poland. A medical error left her disabled: doctors thought she had TB, when she had a dislocated hip. Confined to a cast, she was kept in bed for a year. She had one leg shorter than the other, and a pronounced limp. Studying at the Russian High School, she excelled and her political conscience was growing. She wrote to a friend **“My ideal is a social system that allows one to love everybody with a clear conscience. Striving after it, defending it, I may perhaps even learn to hate.”** After graduating, 1887, she joined the Polish Marxist party, Proletariat, now underground having organized strikes the previous year, brutally crushed by the Russian authorities. She enrolled at Zurich University, 1889, meeting other leading socialists, founding the Polish Socialist Party. She gained a doctorate in Paris, then lived by journalism while politically agitating. After the failure of the 1905 Revolution she wrote ‘The Mass Strike’. At the 1907 congress of the Russian party, Trotsky described her as: **“a little woman, frail and even sickly looking, but with a noble face and beautiful eyes that radiated intelligence; she captivated one by the sheer courage of her mind and character.”** Rosa opposed the First World War and was imprisoned by Germany for 3 years. This enabled her to write and form the Spartacist League. In 1918, the Fleet mutinied and workers took over their factories leading to the end of 1st World War. Rosa was a founder of the German Communist Party, but the Social Democrat Government allowed the para-military Freikorps to attack workers, over 1000 were killed. The Freikorps threw Rosa in a river where she died.



Rosa Luxemburg



Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937) was of Albanian descent. He grew up stunted and ‘hunchbacked’. The family attributed his impairment to being dropped by a servant, but it was probably Pott’s disease (tuberculosis of the bones). His father lost his job, so Gramsci left school at 12 to work in a tax office. He studied at night school before Turin University. He was influenced by socialist ideas and involved as a leader in the upsurge in workers’ militancy with the Russian Revolution. He was a founder of L’Ordine Nuovo, a socialist review, operating under the slogan: **“Educate yourselves because we’ll need all your intelligence. Stir yourselves because we’ll need all your enthusiasm. Organize yourselves because we’ll need all your strength.”** The factory council movement – echoing the Russian Soviets – spread through Turin and other industrial cities. In April 1920 there was a general strike in Turin. Gramsci was one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party, 1921. In poor health, he travelled to Moscow as a delegate to the Communist International, 1922, ending up in a Sanatorium in Russia, where he met his wife, violinist Julia Schucht. Meanwhile Mussolini came to power in Italy. In his absence Gramsci was elected to Parliament. He returned to Italy, 1924. He took up his place thinking he had immunity from arrest. Later he was arrested with others and put on trial, 1929. The prosecution said. **“We must prevent this brain from functioning for 20 years.”** Though Gramsci’s health continued to deteriorate, he wrote his famous Prison Notebooks, whose ideas such as ‘hegemony’ influence political thinking today. Gramsci was eventually released, 1937, dying of a stroke 4 days later, having never met his younger son.

Antonio Gramsci

