



ROSA LUXEMBURG ON CHARLEMAGNE

by Pierre Beaudry, February 26, 2013



“In the beginning was the deed!”

Rosa Luxemburg

“It’s the intention stupid!”

Dehors Debonneheure

This note, and the following translation of a few excerpts of Rosa Luxemburg’s *Introduction à l’économie politique*, is aimed at reflecting the significance of what Lyn said about the underlying intention behind Charlemagne’s revolutionary work and of Rosa’s insight into it. As Lyn put it,

“What he had achieved as durable qualities of those created effects of his reign, remain, still, as traceable to what Rosa Luxemburg had correctly noted in the course of her own scholarly achievements, as among the world’s leading economists of her own time. Nonetheless, we must ask: what had directed the motives of that quality which he had actually represented as the relative great genius of his, Charlemagne’s, relatively brief reign? Behind the well-defined apparent motives, what is the underlying motive for the motives themselves, those of then, or now? The honest answer to such questions is neither obvious, nor simple in any degree. They require the wisdom gained from the effect of true discoveries of universal principles.” (Lyndon LaRouche, [IT IS TIME FOR YOU TO THINK, REALLY](#), February 10, 2013, LaRouchePAC)

The point to be emphasized, here, is that Rosa captured the essence of the intention behind the intention of Charlemagne’s economics, as Lyn indicated: “underlying motive for the motive themselves.” She identified that Charlemagne’s intention behind his economic motivation was not merely to feed and clothe people, but, also, to foster the increase power of mankind, by assuring that a society which takes care of its entire people, especially the needier (regardless of the differences which exists among them) is a guarantee against any future failings, because its ultimate intention is the universal good, and only the universal good has a future. It is in that sense that Rosa understood that Charlemagne was a true

revolutionary, because he was able to capture and shape the spontaneous moment of change of his time. As she wrote to Karl Kautsky on July 13, 1900:

“Every time I... see that frightful spectacle, the splashing spray, the bleached whiteness of the water cavern, and hear that deafening roar, it wrings my heart, and something in me says: there stands the enemy. Are you astonished? Of course, it is that enemy – human vanity – which fancies itself to be something else and then suddenly collapses into nothing. A similar effect, incidentally, is achieved by a world-picture which reduces all events, as Ben Akiba did, to: ‘it was always so’, ‘it will get better by itself’, etc. and which consequently represents man with his will, his ability, and his knowledge as superfluous... For this reason I hate such a philosophy, *mon cher Charlemagne*, and shall stick to the idea that it would be better for people to have to plunge into the Falls of the Rhine and go under like a nut-shell than to nod wisely and let the waters go on rushing by, as they did in the time of our ancestors and will go on after our time.” (Paul Frölich, [Rosa Luxemburg](#), Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2010, p. 141)

What Rosa was referring to with “*Mon Cher Charlemagne*” addressed to her friend Kautsky was the pulse-beat of a mass strike phenomenon that Charlemagne had clearly understood during his time. Indeed, the spontaneous revolutionary moment is not reflected by some aimless and unruly mass of abused people; it is the sort of situation which demands self-conscious leadership of a handful of individuals who are in tune with historical conditions that reflect the process of an axiomatic change inside of the human mind.

The intention behind the Glass-Steagall legislation of today, for example, is not aimed at solving the past monetary mess of the American Banking system; the intention is to solve the economic problems that are coming from the future.

The following excerpts have been extracted from Rosa Luxemburg, [INTRODUCTION A L’ECONOMIE POLITIQUE \(1925\)](#) [Electronic copy made by Jean-Marie Tremblay, Sociology Professor, Cegep of Chicoutimi, Quebec. Originally translated from ROSA LUXEMBURG: *Einführung in die Nationalökonomie* from : *AUSGEWÄHLTE REDEN UND SCHRIFTEN* Published at Dietz Verlag, Berlin - 1951 (Vol. I, pp. 411-741)]

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“Forget the small peasant enterprise which vegetates in some lost corner of the land, and instead, direct your attention to the heights of a mighty empire, that of Charlemagne. This emperor, who turned the German Empire of the early ninth century into the most powerful empire of Europe, expanded and consolidated his domain by undertaking no less than 53 military expeditions, and had unified under his scepter, in addition to present-day Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland, northern Spain, Holland and Belgium. Charlemagne took the economic situation of his domains and farming institutions very

seriously. He wrote in his own hand a text of law containing 70 propositions concerning the economics of his farms known as the famous *Capitulare de villis* (Farm Capitulary). This is a document on the farming laws of his domains which has been preserved as a precious jewel that has been historically transmitted in spite of the dust and mildew of the archives. This document deserves all of our attention for two reasons.

“First, most of Charlemagne’s farms later became powerful imperial cities, such as Aix, Cologne, Munich, Basel, Strasbourg and many others which had originally been former farms of Emperor Charles. Second, those Charlemagne economic institutions have served as models for all major secular and religious domains of the early Middle-Ages. The Charlemagne farms had transformed the old traditions of ancient Rome and the refined life of its noble farmers into the less polished new German war-nobility. His prescriptions for the culture of the vine, of fruits and vegetables, for horticulture, for raising poultry, etc., were a historical act of civilization.

“Let us examine this document closely. The great emperor demands above all to be served honestly and that his subjects become cared for everywhere on his domains; so that they are sheltered from poverty and that they should not be overworked beyond their strength. If they work into the night, they should be compensated. But the subjects, for their part, must remain loyal and take care of the vineyard, press the grapes, and put the wine into bottles so that it does not spoil. If they were to evade their obligations, they would be punished.”

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“And there are no mysterious "laws" in the science of political economy that need to be studied and deciphered in this Carolingian economy, since all connections, causes and effects, work and results are as clear as day. Perhaps the reader might once again complain that we have, one more time, used a bad example. After all, it appears from the documentation of Charlemagne that this is not a public economy of the German Empire, but the private economy of the emperor. However, if we were to oppose these two concepts, we would surely commit an error of historical proportion in regard to the Middle-Ages. Yes, indeed, the capitularies concern the economy of Emperor Charles’ farms and domains, but he ran his domains as a prince, not in particular. Or more precisely, the emperor was a landlord of his lands, as any important noble landlord of the Middle-Ages, especially during the time of Charlemagne, was an emperor in the small; that is to say, by virtue of being a free and noble proprietor of the soil, he enacted laws, raised taxes, and dispensed justice for all the people of his domains. The economic provisions taken by Charlemagne were indeed acts of government, as evidenced by their very strength: they are one of the 65 "capitularies" written by the emperor and published at the annual meeting of the Peers of the Empire.

“And provisions for radishes and iron ringed barrels carry the same authority and are written in the same style as, for example, religious exhortations from the "*Capitula Episcoporum*", (Episcopal Law) where Charlemagne pulls the ear of the Lord's servants, admonishing them vigorously not to swear, not to get drunk, not to go to bad places, not to have any women, and not to overprice the sale of the holy sacraments. You can look anywhere you wish in the Middle-Ages, and nowhere will you find an economic enterprise which has not been modeled and typified on the economics of Charlemagne, whether they are great noble estates, or small peasant exploitations as described above, whether they represent isolated peasant families working for themselves, or cooperative communities.

“What is most striking in those two examples is that in both cases the needs for human existence guide and dictate work so imperatively, and the results correspond so exactly to the intentions and the needs of the people that the conditions acquire, on the large or small scale, a surprising simplicity and clarity. The small farmer in his farm and the greatest monarch in his domain know exactly what they want to get from their production. It is not very difficult to figure out: they both want to meet the natural needs of humanity in food and drink, in clothing and in other amenities of life. The only difference between them is that the peasant probably sleeps on straw, and the big landowner on a soft quilt, the peasant drinks beer or mead with his meals, and the big landowner fine wines. The only difference lies in the quantity and quality of the goods. But the foundation of the economy and its intention, the satisfaction of human needs, remain the same.”

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“At that time, there began to emerge a small contingent of poor people and beggars, due to the many wars or to the disappearance of individual fortunes. The caring for the poor was considered an obligation for society. Already Emperor Charlemagne expressly prescribed in his capitularies: "Regarding beggars who roam the countryside, we want each of our vassals to nourish these poor people, either on his fief, or in his house, and he is not allowed to let them go begging elsewhere." Later, it was particular religious convents that housed the poor and gave them work, if they were capable. During the Middle-Ages, while the needy were sure to find a home in every house, caring for the poor was considered a duty and no contempt was attached to beggars as it is the case today.”

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