

Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and Che Guevara

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This is the Preface to the forthcoming book *Manifesto: Three Essays on How to Change the World* published by Ocean Press: Melbourne/New York 2005.

If you are curious and open to the life around you, if you are troubled as to why, how and by whom political power is held and used, if you sense there must be good intellectual reasons for your unease, if your curiosity and openness drive you toward wishing to act with others, to “do something,” you already have much in common with the writers of the three essays in this book.

The essays in *Manifesto* were written by three relatively young people-Karl Marx when he was 30, Rosa Luxemburg at 27, Che Guevara at the age of 37. Born into different historical moments and different generations, they shared an energy of hope, an engagement with history, a belief that critical thinking must inform action, and a passion for the world and its human possibilities. That society as it was materially constructed would have to undergo radical change in order for such possibilities, stifled or denied under existing conditions, to be realized, all three affirmed in their lives and work. They were educated, reflective people who sharpened their thinking powers on that endeavor.

Marx lived most of his prodigiously creative life in poverty and exile. Rosa Luxemburg and Che Guevara were targeted and assassinated for their intellectual and active leadership in socialist movements. Any one of them might have led the life of a relatively comfortable professional. Each made a different choice. Yet reading what they wrote, including the essays in this book, one feels not the grimness of a tooth-gritting, dogma-driven politics, but the verve and exuberance of mind that accompanies creative indignation. For all three, feeling intensely alive translated into the vision of an integrated society, in which each person could become both individuated and socially responsible: an association, as a famous phrase from the Communist Manifesto expresses it, “in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” [1] Or, as Che told a group of Cuban medical students and health workers in 1960:

“The revolution is not, as some claim, a standardizer of collective will, of collective initiative. To the contrary, it is a liberator of human beings’ individual capacity. What the revolution does do, however, is to direct that capacity.” [2]

None of them was thinking in isolation or in a historic vacuum. They had the past and its earlier thinkers to learn from and critique; they observed and participated in social movements; they worked out and argued ideas and strategies, sometimes fiercely, with comrades (Marx especially with Frederick Engels, Luxemburg with Leo Jogiches, Clara Zetkin, Karl Kautsky, and others of the German Social Democratic party, Che Guevara with Fidel Castro, other Latin Americans and with leaders of the “non-aligned” nations.) They saw themselves not as “public intellectuals” but as witnesses of and contributors to the growing consciousness of a class which produced wealth and leisure without sharing in it, a class fully capable of reason and enlightened action, though often lacking the formal education that could lead to political power.

That the working people who produced the wealth of the world could move toward political and economic emancipation, they did not simply believe but saw as a necessary evolution in human history. Revolutions were all around them, mass movements, strikes, international organizing. But it was not just the temper of their times that drew them into activity. (Many professionals and writers, especially when young, have been attracted by a moment's flaring promise of social change, only to pull back as the wind-chill of opposition begins to freeze the air.) Rather, they observed around them the accelerating relationship between private wealth and massive suffering, capital's devouring appetite for expansion of its markets at whatever human cost (including its wars): and in that awareness they also saw the meaning of their lives.

As a young medical student traveling through Latin America, Che Guevara noted this concretely:

"I went to see an old woman with asthma...The poor thing was in a pitiful state, breathing the acrid smell of concentrated sweat and dirty feet that filled her room, mixed with the dust from a couple of armchairs, the only luxury items in her house. On top of her asthma, she had a heart condition. It is at times like this, when a doctor is conscious of his complete powerlessness, that he longs for change: a change to prevent the injustice of a system in which only a month ago this poor woman was still earning her living as a waitress, wheezing and panting but facing life with dignity." [3]

It was Marx first of all who described how capital not only dispossesses and forces the vast majority of people "to sell themselves piecemeal," but contains, ultimately, its own undoing:

"Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells." [4]

But he first lays forth an exposition of the history of capitalism, the emergence of bourgeois or owning-class power and the effects of that power, a panorama so prescient of 21st century social conditions that it transcends its own moment of writing. As Che was to observe in 1964:

"The merit of Marx is that he suddenly produces a qualitative change in the history of social thought. He interprets history, he understands its dynamic, foresees the future. But in addition to foreseeing it (by which he would meet his scientific obligation), he expresses a revolutionary concept: it is not enough to interpret the world, it must be transformed." [5]

And in fact, over more than 150 years the *Communist Manifesto* has become the most influential, most translated, reprinted (and demonized) single document of modern history. It's a work of extraordinary literary power fused with historical analysis; a document of its time yet resonant, as we see here, for later generations. A document which can be, has been, critiqued and argued with—even by its author— but which will be carried into any future that is bearable to contemplate.

Marx, Luxemburg and Guevara were revolutionaries but they were not romantics. Their often poetic eloquence is grounded in their study and critical analysis of human society and political economy from the earliest communistic arrangements of pre-history to the emergence of modern capitalism and imperialist wars. They did not idealize past societies or attempt to create marginal communities of lifestyle purists, but—beginning with Marx—they scrutinized the illusions of past and contemporary reformers and rebels in the light of history, aware how easy it can be for parties and leaders to lose momentum, drift off and settle down with existing relationships of power. (It is this kind of compromise that Luxemburg addresses in "Reform and Revolution.")

So what have we here?

The *Communist Manifesto* was so named because at a certain moment the emerging German League of Communists asked Marx and Engels to draft a platform. Thus, Marx is both setting forth a new theory of history and making a program manifest: asking, what in economic history has produced the need for Communism as a movement and what does Communism in 1848 actually stand for? He describes, with admiration as well as condemnation, the contradictory achievements of industrial capitalism. He notes, sometimes with scorching wit, the “spectral” interpretations of Communism floating abroad, and defines its real goal as common ownership of the means of production.

Fifty years later, in 1898, Luxemburg vigorously analyzes the reformist “opportunism” that would keep the old systemic relations of ownership and production in place under the guise of socialist reform. She dissects this opportunism in the ideas of Eduard Bernstein, an elder leader of the German Marxist Social Democratic Party with the additional cachet of being Engels’ literary executor. Her confrontation is coming from a young person, a foreigner, and a woman in a party rife with “virulent male chauvinism.” [6] Coming from anyone, it would have constituted a brilliant intellectual autopsy.

Luxemburg makes it clear that to be anti-reformist is not to be anti-reform:

“For Social Democracy there exists an indissoluble tie between social reform and revolution. The struggle for reforms is its means; the social revolution, its goal.” [7]

With her critique of Bernstein’s article as a springboard, she goes on to enunciate ideas that acquire renewed pungency and suggestiveness today:

“The fate of the socialist movement is not bound to bourgeois democracy; but the fate of democracy, on the contrary, is bound to the socialist movement. Democracy does not acquire greater chances of life in the measure that the working class renounces the struggle for its emancipation; on the contrary, democracy acquires greater chances of survival as the socialist movement becomes sufficiently strong to struggle against the reactionary consequences of world politics and the bourgeois desertion of democracy. He who would strengthen democracy must also want to strengthen and not weaken the socialist movement; and with the renunciation of the struggle for socialism goes that of both the labor movement and democracy.” [8]

“Legal reform and revolution are not different methods of historical progress that can be picked out at pleasure from the counter of history, just as one chooses hot or cold sausages. They are different moments in the development of class society which condition and complement each other, and at the same time exclude each other reciprocally...”

In effect, every legal constitution is the product of a revolution. In the history of classes, revolution is the act of political creation while legislation is the political expression of the life of a society that has already come into being. Work for legal reforms does not itself contain its own driving force independent from revolution." [9]

In 1964, Che Guevara, as participant-theorist of an actual ongoing revolution, writes to an Uruguayan editor friend a letter obviously intended to make manifest the experience of the emerging Cuban society. By then, Che, an Argentinian, had traveled on his continent, studied Marxism in Guatemala, fought along with Fidel Castro and the “July 26 Movement,” served in the new Cuban revolutionary government, and was beginning to work for the extension of socialism in Latin America and among the “non-aligned” nations of Africa and Asia. He is writing of the labor pains of a transitional revolutionary society. How is it to be born? There is the idea, Socialism, and there is also “the human being”-incomplete, coming alive in new conditions where labor becomes shared social responsibility, but also initially dwelling as it were between two vastly different worlds:

The new society in formation has to compete fiercely with the past. [10] Commodity relationships are still imprinted on the mind. This phase of revolutionary process is new and unstable and anxiety may seek relief in autocratic rigidity. The leadership in such a transition has need for a vigilant, well-calibrated self-criticism. Rosa Luxemburg had written: Revolutions are not 'made' and great movements of the people are not produced according to technical recipes that repose in the pockets of the party leaders. [11] Che envisioned that society as a whole must be converted into a gigantic school [12]; those who hope to educate must be in constant and responsive touch with those who are learning: teachers must also be learners.

In this connection it's necessary to think about art and culture. Marx writes of how

"the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the means of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of societyâ€\.[U]ninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air..." [13]

And, in a system of commodity relationships, "the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science" become "paid wage laborers" who must "sell themselves piecemeal" and "are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of exploitation, all the fluctuations of the market." For the artist, this can also mean censorship by the market.

Che elaborates this theme:

"The superstructure [of capitalism] demands a kind of art that the artist has to be educated in. Rebels are subdued by the machine, and only exceptional talents [I read this phrase as in ironic quotes] may create their own work. The rest become shamefaced hirelings or are crushedâ€\ Meaningless anguish or vulgar amusement thus become convenient safety valves for human anxiety. The idea of using art as a weapon of protest is combated." [14]

But he also points to the blinders of earlier socialist revolutions-in-process, where "an exaggerated dogmatism" has tried to address the question of culture, demanding "the formally exact representation of nature" in art, followed by "a mechanical representation of the social reality they wanted to show: the ideal society, almost without conflicts or contradictions, that they sought to create." [15]

Che struggles here with the dialectic of art as simultaneously embodiment and shaper of consciousness, rooted in past forms and materials even as it gestures toward a still unachieved reality. What is to be the freedom of the artist in the new Cuba? It can be difficult, living under present conditions, to conceive of how a freedom expanded to all, to each and every person, might expand, not limit, the freedom of the imaginative artist, and the very possibilities of art. Difficult for those who are already artists—even as, outraged, we are forced to market ourselves piecemeal and struggle for what Marx called "disposable time"[Grundrisse, p. 708]—to see the "invisible cage" within which we work, Difficult, too, perhaps, for the navigators of a new society to apprehend the peculiar, but not exceptional, labor of the artist.

In the words of the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci:

"...to be precise, one should speak of a struggle for a 'new culture' and not for a 'new art' (in the immediate sense)â€\.[P]erhaps it cannot even be said that the struggle is for a new artistic content apart from form because content cannot be considered abstractly, in separation from form. To fight

for a new art would mean to fight to create new individual artists, which is absurd since artists cannot be created artificially. One must speak of a struggle for a new culture, that is, for a new moral life that cannot but be intimately connected to a new intuition of life, until it becomes a new way of feeling and seeing reality and, therefore, a world intimately engrained in 'possible artists' and 'possible works of art'." [16]

The serious revolutionary, like the serious artist, can't afford to lead a self-indulgent or self-deceiving life. Patience, realism and critical imagination are required of both kinds of creativity. Yet all the writers in this book speak emotionally of the human condition and of human realization, not as "losing oneself" within a mass collectivity but as release from the frozen senses, the dumbed-down alienation of mass society: Marx of "the complete emancipation of all the human qualities and senses [from the mere sense of having]" "The eye has become a human eye when its object has become a human, social object" [17]; Rosa Luxemburg of "social happiness," of the mass strike as "creativity," of "freedom" as no "special privilege" and of the "love of every beautiful day." And Che of the revolutionary as "moved by great feelings of love" though this may "seem ridiculous" in bourgeois politics; of the need for a "new human being" created through responsible participation in a society belonging to all.

As Aijaz Ahmad has written, "The first resource of hope is memory itself." [18] Marxism is founded on the historical memory of how existing, apparently immutable, human relationships came to be as they are. In the essays that follow we hear voices from three different generations of people who believed, as recent enormous anti-war and anti-imperialist gatherings on every continent have been asserting, that "another world is possible." If for some today this still only means trying to regulate and refurbish the runaway engine of capitalism, for an ever-growing number of others it means changing the direction of the journey, toward an utterly different, still-forming reality. Here are urgent conversations from the past that are still being carried on, among new voices, throughout the world.

Adrienne Rich, March 2004

P.S.

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<http://www.zcommunications.org/karl-marx-rosa-luxemburg-and-che-guevara-by-adrienne-rich>

Footnotes

[1] The Communist Manifesto, London and New York:Verso 1998, p. 62

[2] Che Guevara Reader, Ocean Press 1997, p. 98

[3] Che Guevara, Motorcycle Diaries, Ocean Press 2003, p. 70

[4] Communist Manifesto, Verso, p. 41

[5] "Notes for the Study of the Ideology of the Cuban Revolution" Che Guevara Reader ,p. 108

[6] Raya Dunayevskaya, Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution, 2d ed., Univ. of Illinois Press 1991, p. 27.

[7] Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, eds., The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, Monthly Review Press, 2004, p. 129.

[8] Rosa Luxemburg Reader, pp. 154-155.

[9] RL Reader, p. 156.

[10] CG Reader p. 201

[11] RL Reader, p. 328.

[12] CG Reader p.202

[13] CM, Verso, p. 38

[14] CG Reader p. 207

[15] CGReader, p. 208

[16] Gramsci, Selections from Cultural Writings, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, tr. William Boelhower. 1985, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, p. 98.

[17] "Private Property and Communism" in Kamenka, ed. The Portable Karl Marx

[18] "Resources of Hope: A Reflection on Our Times," in Frontline (India) Vol. 18 #10, May 15-25 2001.