

THREE CLASSICS

Invisible Threads of History

Alex Miller

Given 170 or so pages and the opportunity to reprint three socialist classics* with, in Cuban revolutionary Armando Hart's words, "the essential aim of encouraging a search for ideas that will be useful in finding the paths to revolutionary transformation", which three would you choose? Ocean Books have answered this intriguing question by publishing together *The Communist Manifesto (1848)* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Reform or Revolution (1899)* by Rosa Luxemburg and *Socialism and Man in Cuba (1965)* by Che Guevara.

The Communist Manifesto, written in 1847 at the invitation of the League of Communists, is probably the most famous and most discussed political document of all time, setting out the Marxist view of history and politics in a literary tour de force of less than 40 pages. If you were only ever to read just one book by Marx, it should be this. Indeed, if you were only ever to read just one book of political philosophy, it should be this. In fact, if you were only ever to read just one book, it should be this!

In a single famous sentence, the Manifesto crystallises the Marxist philosophy of history: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." In just 15 pages of the most powerful prose ever written, it charts the rise of modern capitalism and describes features one can easily recognise even after 150 years: "Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted 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, all that is holy is profaned ..."

The Manifesto also describes the rise of a class—the proletariat—with the power and the motivation to sweep away capitalism and to replace the capitalist organisation of society with "an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all". It ends with the great rallying cry: "Workers of all countries, unite!"

Luxemburg was one of the most brilliant minds in the generation of socialists following Marx's death. Her *Reform or Revolution* is a brilliantly written demolition of what she regarded as the perversion of Marxism by one of the leading intellectual figures in the German socialist movement at the end of the 19th century, Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein argued that, contrary to *The Communist Manifesto*, a "communist revolution" led by the proletariat was not required to overthrow the political rule of the bourgeoisie in order to institute socialism, because capitalism itself was gradually evolving in the direction of socialism in a way that undercut the original Marxist prediction that capitalism would eventually descend into chaos.

Against Bernstein and the liberals of today who follow in his shoes, Luxemburg argues that "Democratic institutions have completely exhausted their function as aids in the development of bourgeois society". Her comments on universal suffrage in Belgium could apply to all the civil liberties and democratic institutions currently threatened in even the advanced "democratic" capitalist states: "We have here a 'bit of democracy' that has been won not by the bourgeoisie but against it." Luxemburg advises, "we must abandon all hope of establishing democracy as a general law of historical development even within the framework of modern society". If this was true in 1899, it is all the more true and relevant in the age of Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib.

Like Luxemburg, who was murdered by fascist militia in Berlin in January 1919, Che Guevara paid with his life for his commitment to the cause of human emancipation, shot dead by US-trained reactionaries in Bolivia in 1967. In the third and shortest of the book's three essays, Guevara reflects on the moral and cultural challenges facing a victorious revolution. In a sustained reflection on the role of subjectivity in the revolutionary process, Guevara stresses that the advancement of the revolution "requires the development of a consciousness in which there is a new scale of values" and argues that following the revolution, "Society as a whole must be converted into a gigantic school". As with Marx and Luxemburg, the emphasis is on socialist democracy and the opportunities socialism affords for the liberation of the individual. Guevara is scathing of "socialist realism" in art and warns that the revolution must not create "docile servants of official thought ... practicing freedom in quotation marks".

In his introduction, Hart refers to "the invisible threads linking human beings across history". The essays in this volume remind people that all are linked by those threads to Marx and Engels, Luxemburg and Guevara. This book would make an ideal text for a socialist discussion or study group. As Adrienne Rich puts it in her preface: "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."

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***MANIFESTO: THREE CLASSIC ESSAYS ON HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD**

Ocean Books, 168 pages