

# The Communist Manifesto at 150

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**O**NE HUNDRED fifty years after its publication, and almost a decade after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, can something still be learned from *The Communist Manifesto*?

The *Manifesto* is perhaps the most unabashedly rhetorical and flamboyant of Marx and Engels's writings. At the same time, it is a theoretical tract of impressive richness, expressing a closely argued philosophy of history. It abounds with resonant phrases: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle," "The bourgeoisie produces, above all, its own grave-diggers," "The proletarians do not have a homeland," "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains," "Working men of all countries, unite!" These are among the most memorable political quotes ever used and abused; they gained an almost liturgical status and were sometimes reiterated ad nauseam by commissars and political hacks with no real grasp of their meaning or historical significance.

The *Manifesto* has also been worshiped by some of the best minds of the European and American intelligentsia. They often seemed so mesmerized by its prophetic cadences that they were unable to peer beyond the looking glass and see the horrors of Soviet reality and Stalinist repression. The beguiling moral certitudes of the *Manifesto*'s lofty rhetoric sometimes served as a shield against reality. What was intended to be a key to the hieroglyph of history became just another instrument in the hands of oligarchs seeking to defend their own privileges.

Yet there is much more to the *Manifesto* than this. First and foremost, and perhaps most paradoxically, is its insight into the radi-

cally transformative nature of modern capitalism. In the first chapter of the *Manifesto* ("Bourgeois and Proletarians") Marx and Engels demonstrate a remarkable understanding of the permanent revolution immanent in the dynamics of what they called the capitalist mode of production. When many of capitalism's champions had not yet understood its full historical import, and when most of its socialist critics still saw industrial capitalism as a monster just to be slain, Marx and Engels, developing with much greater nuance the claims made first by the Saint-Simonians, pointed to the unprecedented way in which human creative capacities could be unleashed by capitalism. Capitalism, they argued, must first be adopted, and then, dialectically, must become the object of criticism—and then it must be transcended, *aufgehoben*, in a truly Hegelian sense. Without industrial capitalism, there could be no socialism.

**I**N MARX and Engels's view, capitalism unleashes a revolution with which it cannot cope: like the sorcerer's apprentice, it needs a guiding rational hand that can channel its forces toward their *telos*. The contradictions of capitalism (another phrase to be much abused by epigoni) were revealed in its self-destructive nature, and would lead ultimately to a socialized mode of production.

Few analysts in the mid-nineteenth century were as perceptive as Marx and Engels about the fundamental difference between industrial capitalism and all previous forms of production. Industrial capitalism, they argued, was not just a quantitatively more developed form of production; it was qualitatively different, because it created for the first time in history a universal market as well as a universal culture. In the late 1990s, when "globalization" appears as if it were a novel phenomenon, it is worth recalling their actual words:

The bourgeoisie . . . has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground—what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labor?

Or:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new forms become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into the air, all that is holy is profaned.

And finally:

The bourgeoisie . . . draws all, even the most barbarian nations into civilization . . . it compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production . . . In one word, it creates a world after its own image. . . . And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there emerges a world literature.

In the universalizing nature of capitalism Marx finds the historical instrument by which the universalist vision of the Enlightenment might be realized; and he also finds the means for creating the material conditions required

by the forthcoming socialist epoch.

The world today is dramatically different from that described in the *Manifesto*; yet this is an outcome of the transformative nature of capitalism and the industrial revolution that Marx and Engels described. But while they were among the first to appreciate capitalism's immanent radicalism, they were obviously wrong when they asserted that as capitalism developed, its social tensions would grow more extreme and its classes more polarized. Almost the precise opposite came to pass. The more capitalism developed, the more its class distinctions were attenuated; new middle classes emerged, as did professional workers, and wide sectors of the traditional working class underwent *embourgeoisement*. History disproved Marx's almost Manichaeian vision of brutalized and alienated workers confronting a small and shrinking capitalist class. It was only in non- or underindustrialized countries that radical social polarization became the norm.

PART OF the problem was epistemological: while Marx and Engels spoke of capitalism "constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production," they conceived this in a linear way. Industrial society as they knew it was dependent largely on machinery that was powered by steam derived from burning coal. This became the only conceivable industrial society for them. They failed to imagine its supersession by another type of industrial society, one that was different in kind because it was based on other sources of energy and technology.

In this way, Marx and Engels limited their own vision and thus their ability to imagine technological and social alternatives. Of course one cannot cavil with them for not foreseeing the consequences of electrical power or the invention of computers (which demand a completely different kind of worker—educated, literate, and sophisticated—than that required by nineteenth-century machinery). Still, Marx and Engels can be criticized for not projecting beyond a linear development of technology—for failing to anticipate that instead of machines just becoming bigger and more efficient, there would also be qualitative changes

and, corresponding with them, new and different kinds of social structure. In describing future industrial development in purely quantitative terms, Marx and Engels thus failed to draw out the implications of their own insight that capitalism is inherently restless and driven to innovate. For all their critical prowess, Marx and Engels were children of their own time.

Still, although polarization did not, as a rule, take place *within* advanced industrial societies as Marx and Engels predicted, something quite like it did occur on the global level: the widening gap between industrialized and less-industrialized lands is a consequence of the very integration of the latter into the globalized economy. Third world populations have become integral parts of a world market, as both (low-paid) producers and consumers. Instead of an internal polarization between capitalists and proletarians there is an external one between “capitalist” and “proletarian” nations.

So polarization has been exported from and universalized by the industrialized nations. If Marx and Engels’s analyses are mostly invalid for the advanced nations today, they have been vindicated by the facts of globalization—the sweatshops of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, with their child labor, their horrendously unsanitary working and living conditions, and their lack of minimum-wage laws and basic social welfare networks. Here, then, are the successors of the sweatshops of London’s East End or New York’s Lower East Side. And conditions in some postcommunist societies, especially Russia, do resemble those of the early, wild capitalism of nineteenth-century Europe.

### Capitalism’s Fate

Marx and Engels’s prognoses about the role of the state in capitalism’s social development also proved to be short-sighted. When they declared that “the proletarians do not have a homeland,” they had in mind societies in which the working class was totally alienated from existing political institutions. One should recall that when the *Manifesto* was written there was no universal suffrage in Europe: where there were parliamentary institutions the franchise belonged to a very restricted—well-to-do—part of the population. This is the real source of Marx and Engels’s scathing criti-

cism of parliaments and their contempt for “representative” institutions that were in fact nothing more than “the executive committee of the exploiting classes.”

But today’s Western democracies have little in common with those societies: Europe and North America have undergone a radical transformation—one that has allowed a greater integration of the working class into political and economic structures. There is again a paradox involved, if we turn back to the analyses provided by *The Communist Manifesto*. By the end of the nineteenth century universal male suffrage became the general rule in most Western capitalist societies. The proletariat no longer stood outside the political realm, and most parties were forced to incorporate at least some socialist demands into their programs, as they had to compete with strong socialist parties that emerged across Western Europe. Half a century after the *Manifesto* was written, one could no longer maintain that workers were totally alienated from and impotent in the face of the established political structure. By 1900, “the proletarians do not have a homeland” was sounding more and more like a hollow phrase.

THE STATE described in the *Manifesto* was early capitalism’s minimalist state; it refrained as much as possible from interfering in economic and social affairs and, more or less, followed Adam Smith’s principle of laissez-faire.\* This “night watchman state” (as Lassalle later called it) could rightly be characterized as little more than the political expression of the dominant class’s economic interests; after all, the commercial class thought any state interference in the “free” operation of the market to be against its own interests.

Yet it was capitalist development itself that compelled the state to intervene increasingly in social and economic life. This may have started with minimal, humanitarian legislation to alleviate some of the more horrendous traits of early industrialization; but later, the need to blunt socialist criticisms and counter the

\*Marx knew, of course, that historical reality was much more complicated than the model. See his nuanced descriptions of the state in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and *The Civil War in France*.

power of unionized labor led to the slow introduction of forms of medical and social insurance that not only curtailed the absolutism of market forces but expanded the state's role as a protector of workers. The growth of trade unions further increased the participation of workers in social and political life. After the crash of 1929—which bore out Marx's predictions about the cyclical crises of capitalism—Keynesianism turned the Western capitalist state into the major regulator of economic life. It was a defensive measure, and it successfully prevented cyclical crises from becoming structural crises that would threaten the very existence of capitalism. In the meantime, expanding social legislation gave to widening sectors of the working class a stake in the system as a whole.

ON THE most elementary level, these developments proved Marx's predictions wrong: capitalism turned out to be resilient and did not collapse. On another level, however, Marx appears to have been prescient: laissez-faire capitalism could not survive and state intervention was necessary. It was precisely those who were out to prevent capitalist collapse—the Keynesians—who had to recognize the accuracy of Marx's claims. But he was wrong to assume that the only form of capitalism was laissez-faire, and that the only alternative was therefore a proletarian revolution. A much less radical cure was beyond his horizons.

In this context, it is interesting to look at the "Ten Regulations" proposed by Marx and Engels in Chapter Two of the *Manifesto*. These were measures to initiate the transition from capitalism to socialism, and they are among the few policy proposals Marx ever made for a coming socialist revolution. Many of them have been carried out, albeit in attenuated form, by the twentieth-century welfare state. They include progressive income taxation, the creation of a central bank, nationalization of the means of transportation, public works, the creation of a public industrial sector, and the limitation of the right of inheritance. All these measures as advocated by Marx were aimed at the transformation, over time, of a capitalist into a socialist mode of production. What

evolved instead, by trial and error in most Western industrial societies, was a reformed capitalism.

### The National Question

There is another aspect of the *Manifesto's* historical analysis that was quite wrong, although here its authors were in good company: its understanding of nationalism.

Like most people influenced by Enlightenment universalism, Marx and Engels viewed nationalism as a premodern form of particularism; it would, they thought, disappear under the globalizing impact of capitalism. Socialism would thus inherit a postnational world. After the revolutions of 1848–1849 Marx and Engels modified their views and judged that the attempts for Italian and German unification were necessary for the capitalist and eventual socialist development of those countries. But by and large, nationalism remained for Marx and Engels a retrograde phenomenon.

Marxism shared this disregard for the historical power of nationalism with liberalism, which, from Mill to Rawls, has had little to say about it. This is why both Marxists and liberals usually underestimated nationalism's appeal and miscalculated its consequences. And both also failed to distinguish between liberal, universalist, and harmonistic nationalisms (like Mazzini's, for example) and the exclusivist, aggressive, and xenophobic versions (Treitschke's, for example).

It was left to a number of later socialist thinkers, mainly those who had to confront national issues in multi-ethnic empires, to try to integrate at least the cultural aspect of nationalism—identity, the sense of community—into a universalist vision of socialism: Otto Bauer and Karl Renner in Austria, Jhordania in Georgia, the Bundists as well as Zionist socialists like Moses Hess, Ber Borokhov, and Chaim Arlosoroff in the Jewish context. Still, the blind spot of mainstream Marxism when it came to nationalism remained a major weakness of socialist movements. In 1919 Arlosoroff, the Zionist socialist thinker, pointed out the failure of the reconstituted postwar Socialist International to address adequately the cultural aspects of nationalism. He warned

that this failure might create circumstances in which many working people would look elsewhere to express cultural identity, and that this might overwhelm the socialist movement. These were prophetic words.

### Alchemists of Revolution

Last and not least is the question of Russia. It has sometimes been pointed out that Marx and Engels expected socialist revolution to break out first in the more industrialized nations, where the "inner contradictions" of capitalism were most pronounced. Therefore, it is argued, a socialist revolution in Russia was contrary to Marx's own historical analysis.

Again, the picture is more complex. Toward the end of the *Manifesto*, in a passage overlooked by many commentators, Marx and Engels entertain the possibility of revolution breaking out first in less-industrialized Germany. In latecomers to capitalism, they suggest, some developments are hastened and hence more acute. In their words:

The communists turn their attention chiefly to Germany, because that country is on the eve of a bourgeois revolution that is bound to be carried out under more advanced conditions of European civilization, and with a much more developed proletariat, than that of England in the seventeenth and of France in the eighteenth century, and because the bourgeois revolution in Germany will be but a prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution.

Also, in the introduction to the 1882 Russian translation of the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels suggested that a revolution was now possible in Russia, which had by then undergone the initial stages of capitalist development. They qualified this by adding that it would succeed only if the Russian Revolution became "a signal for the proletarian revolution in the West."

Here lies the rub: the point is not where the revolution breaks out first. Rather it is that the whole concept of revolution in Marx is premised on universality. It can begin in less-developed Russia, but there can be no "Socialism in One Country" there or anywhere else.

This was ultimately the tragedy of the Bolshevik Revolution. To suppose that an underdeveloped country devastated by war, with little industry, a weak bourgeoisie, a small proletariat, and hardly any of the "superstructural" elements of a bourgeois society (representative institutions, a civil society, freedom of the press, and so on) could, single-handedly and without a parallel revolution in the West, attain socialist goals, is entirely outside the framework of ideas enunciated in the *Manifesto*. Any Marxist analysis would have to conclude that an effort to build a socialist society in isolated revolutionary Russia after 1917 was doomed from the start.

THUS WHAT was born as a universalist, emancipatory message became by necessity (and not just because of any personal traits of Lenin or Stalin) an oppressive system. It was born of the misguided attempt to create by force a new reality out of a society without any basis for socialism. The horrors of forced collectivization and the Gulag were the consequences. So the failure of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was unavoidable. What failed there was not the Marxian vision but the attempt to realize it under conditions that were totally contrary to the presuppositions of *The Communist Manifesto* itself. Marx once called some of the more radical elements in his own League of Communists "alchemists of the revolution" because they attempted "to carry out a revolution without the conditions of the revolution." The Soviet Union was such an attempt at revolutionary alchemy, with the predictable murderous results.

The West is another story. The revolution, of course, did not break out there. Does this demonstrate the shortcomings of the Marxist analysis? Or was the *Manifesto* one of history's most glaring examples of self-falsifying prophecy? The jury may still be out in ways more complex than articulated either by supporters or opponents of Marx. ●

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