

WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES UNITE!

Re-viewing The Communist Manifesto

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Introduction

Buried in the notes section of his doctoral thesis – written between 1839 and 1941 – in which Marx begins to carve a critique of Hegel’s work, the young philosopher argues that due to a “deficiency of his principles or an inadequate grasp of them” a philosopher can compromise his work. He then goes on to say that it is the work of his followers “to use the inner core of his thought to illuminate his own superficial expressions”.

According to Marx, this is the only way by which it will be possible to construe “the essential characteristics of his views, giving them a definite form and meaning, and thus at the same time going beyond them” (Marx 1841/2006, 17).

This re-view of *The Communist Manifesto* is an attempt to recapture the essence of both Marx the humanist and Marx the revolutionary, while at the same time – by following his own advice – illuminating his superficial expressions through focusing on the inner core of his thought. In retrospect, the Manifesto can be viewed as a failed project, its core aim of serving as the political strategy for the emancipation of the whole of humanity through the emancipation of the proletariat, has proved a prophetic blunder. Recorded events of failed projects in proletarian emancipation – most notably those that led to the rise and collapse of the USSR – are clear reminders of the failed strategy. Yet, despite such failures, Marx’s Manifesto has three valuable traits of contemporary relevance. The first is the fact that its core aim is to emancipate humanity from the destructive and unjust nature of hierarchical society. The second is the scientific accuracy with which Marx is able to depict the inner workings of Capitalism– views clearly

supported by the continually reoccurring economic crises we are forced to accept. The third, is the revolutionary – the ‘practical-critical’¹ – spirit with which Marx primes the Manifesto, as the responsibility of a philosopher to transcend his own interpretational nature and move towards a politics of the here and now.

The personal interest in writing this re-view is to go beyond Marx’s thought, and to acknowledge the short falls of his Manifesto, yet to rekindle its collectively transformational spirit at a time when revolution has become an unpopular word. When writing this review, I am reminded of the words of the late Howard Zinn, who in a 1998 interview referred to his book *A People’s History of The United States* as an attempt at a “quiet revolution... not a revolution in the classical sense of a seizure of power, but rather from people beginning to take power from within the institutions”². I am confident that in that description, Zinn captured well the need to evoke Marx’s revolutionary spirit, while at the same time revoking his failed strategy.

Remembering the Manifesto

Following the London Congress of the Communist League of 1847 – through *The Communist Manifesto* – Marx was able to materialize the vision of a unified political party of the proletariat, and to carve out what he considered to be a comprehensive strategy for human emancipation. The pamphlet contained a mixture of scholarly supported analysis of societal conditions, braided together with a call to action, and a utopian exposition of what the outcome would be of a proletarian revolution. In essence it presented Marx’s attempt at realizing philosophy as he moved from interpreting the

¹ *Practical-critical* is the alternative term Marx uses to refer to revolution in a *Thesis on Feuerbach*.

² Catherine Parayre, "The Conscience of the Past: An interview with historian Howard Zinn", *Flagpole Magazine Online*, 18 February 1998.

world, towards changing it (Marx *circa* 1845/2006, 173). In laying out the strategy for the ultimate disappearance of the class society, it attempted to carve the way for the proletariat to transcend itself through the realization of philosophy. Thus allowing philosophy to realize itself by transcending the proletariat. (Marx 1844/2006, 82).

Identifying in the means of production and of exchange the cause for changes and developments in human society, Marx's materialist conception of history led him to conclude that the history of society is the history of class struggles. A series of revolutions in the modes of production and exchange caused the rise of the bourgeoisie and of the modern State that serves as a committee for managing bourgeois interests (Marx 1848/2006, 246-247). As a consequence, resolving "personal worth into exchange value", under the banner of Free Trade, the bourgeoisie expanded cosmopolitanism in consumption and production around the globe. In addition, by constantly revolutionizing production and disturbing social conditions, it concentrated property in a few hands, agglomerated populations into industrial hubs, and centralized political power (Marx 1848/2006, 248-249).

As a commodity to be exploited within this system, the labourer became constantly exposed "to all the vicissitudes of competition, [and] to all the fluctuations of the market" (Marx 1848/2006, 251). A situation, which generated clashes between individual workers and their bourgeois masters, until a clash of classes became inevitable as the proletariat organized itself into a class and ultimately into a political party. It was therefore – according to the Manifesto – the responsibility of the Communists to aid in the rising of the proletariat, as it sprung into the air the superincumbent strata of official society. This, Marx argued, could only be achieved by identifying common interests

between the entire world proletariat, and by representing always and everywhere the interests of the movement as a whole (Marx 1848/2006, 255).

In the text, Marx proclaimed that the project of proletariat emancipation required first and foremost, united action in the industrialized nations. For this reason, the last section of the document focused on the evaluation of the different socialist movements active at that time. *Reactionary socialists* were described as aristocrats trying to rally support from the people by waving “the proletarian alms-bag in front for a banner” (Marx 1848/2006, 263). *Petty-Bourgeois Socialists*, although able to dissect “with great acuteness the contradictions in the conditions of modern production”(Marx 1848/2006, 264), were viewed as reactionary utopians. *German or true Socialists*, which Marx saw spreading like and epidemic were portrayed focusing on the interests of the classless Man, existing “only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy” (Marx 1848/2006, 266). *Conservative or Bourgeois Socialists*, “desirous of redressing social grievances” through reforms of all kinds, were described as adherents to the belief that “the bourgeois is a bourgeois – for the benefit of the working class” (Marx 1848/2006, 267-268). Finally, *Critical-Utopian Socialists and Communists*, the pamphlet argued, offered through their attacks on every principle of existing society, “valuable materials for the enlightenment of the working class” (Marx 1848/2006, 269). Nevertheless, in their dream of realizing social Utopias, they “paved the way for the new social Gospel” by appealing “to the feelings and purses of the bourgeois” (Marx 1848/2006, 269).

In comparison, the aim of the *Communists* was to “support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things... [and] labour everywhere for the union and agreement of the democratic parties of all countries” (Marx

1848/2006, 271). Work which for Marx begun formally with the last words of the Manifesto: ‘WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES UNITE!’ A political strategy, which its author claimed would lead to the emancipation of the whole of humanity through the emancipation of the proletariat. The revolution would restructure and redistribute the power and responsibility over the means of production, and thus sweep “away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and [social] classes”. Accordingly, this move would not only abolish the supremacy of the bourgeoisie, but would also abolish the proletariat’s “own supremacy as a class” (Marx 1848/2006, 262). As the Manifesto clearly stated:

“In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx 1848/2006, 262).

The Aftermath of the Failed Proletarian Revolution

In order to avoid becoming a fervent adherent to all aspect of Marx’s one-sidedness³, one must begin by clearly identifying it in the text. It is there that Marx’s inadequate grasp of his own principles is most virulently revealed. His genuine humanism and commitment to social justice, together with his urgency to apply praxis, led him towards a radical politics aimed at grasping the matter at the root. He identified the plight of the proletariat as the most pertinent issue of his time, and thus concluded that the emancipation of the proletariat was the key to human emancipation. Yet, he forgot his own thoughts; “for man the root is man himself” (Marx 1844/2006, 77). Instead, he took the root of the problem to be the class structure and thus, due to an inadequate grasp of

³ In the notes of his doctoral dissertation Marx critiques the adherence to all of Hegel’s one-sidedness by his followers.

his own principles, found himself advocating for a strategy, which was at odds with his own philosophy.

Instead of transcending philosophy by realizing it as he had initially intended, with the writing of the Manifesto, he ended up abandoning philosophy in order to avoid remaining neutral on a moving train⁴. The historical analysis of societal structures laid out in the Manifesto, is based on his materialist conceptions of history, and therefore is completely coherent with his philosophical principles. Nevertheless, the strategic recommendations and utopian predictions of an emancipated world are in complete contradiction to his philosophical reasoning. As the Manifesto is reaching its climax, it reads; “Let the ruling classes tremble at the Communistic revolution” (Marx 1848/2006, 271), yet only a few pages before, he has predicted as the aftermath of bourgeois society, an association “in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”. In his prediction of the outcome of a proletarian revolution against the bourgeois, Marx is breaking away from his own materialist conceptions, and making a metaphysical leap of faith from a current and oppressive bourgeois society, to a future and free proletarian one. How could historical materialism lead him to such a conclusion? Only metaphysics could allow for such predictions.

Perhaps analyzing such a leap of faith would not be pertinent today had the Manifesto not been so influential. Nevertheless, re-viewing the pamphlet today, one is forced into acknowledging the many atrocities, which have been committed in its name, and the many that have been committed against its adherents. In addition, the failure of the Communist project has led to the fragmentation of the political Left, and has given

⁴ Phrase coined by Howard Zinn and used as the title of his autobiography: *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times* (1994) Beacon Press.

room for the political Right to advance without a substantive political alternative as opposition. Traditionally, criticism of the Communist project has focused on rejecting the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat; a very genuine concern arising from such a proposal. The problem however, is that such a critique has often led those on the Left to reject any form of political unity under a formal organizational structure. Fear of such a dictatorship, has kept us dispersed and unable or unwilling to sustain any meaningful political project, supported by a large enough critical mass of individuals.

The possibility exists, that if we carefully re-view the Manifesto and are able to pinpoint its metaphysical aspects, we can use the inner core of Marx's thought, to illuminate his own superficial expressions and go beyond them. It is his momentary abandonment of historical materialism, which grants Marx the ability to propose the revolution that will make the ruling classes tremble, with the aim of reaching an emancipated world of free individuals. If he had remained grounded in historical materialism like Gandhi did when strategizing the emancipation of the individual, perhaps Marx would have understood the following:

“[T]here is no such thing as an imaginary or even perfect definition of independence through violence. For it presupposes only ascendancy of that party of the nation which makes the most effective use of violence. In it perfect equality, economic or otherwise, is inconceivable” (Gandhi 1941/2009, 171).

If we are able to recapture the Manifesto, enlightening it with the inner core of Marx's thought – *“the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”* – we might salvage its end goal of emancipating humanity. Marx's scientific analysis of Capitalism and revolutionary spirit and his commitment to the politics of the here and now, are much needed in the early years of the 21st century. Once Marx's

metaphysical leap of faith is corrected in the Manifesto, there are no impediments to merging his suggestion of a political party of the oppressed, with Gandhi's non-violent philosophy. Perhaps a new Manifesto true to the inner core of Marx's thought could end with the following phrase:

OPPRESSED PEOPLE OF THE WORLD UNITE IN REVOLUTIONARY
NON-VIOLENCE

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