***The Communist Manifesto* (1848)**

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In 1846 several Brussels-based radicals, led by Marx and Engels, formed the Communist Correspondence Committee with the aims of producing propaganda and organizing like-minded European activists. Meanwhile, the interests of the Paris and London-based League of the Just, which had abandoned its Christian-based communism, came to resemble those of Marx’s committee. In the following year the two groups merged to form the small but international Communist League, which commissioned Marx and Engels to produce a campaigning pamphlet (Stedman Jones, 2017: 212-22). Having written two drafts Engels wrote to Marx in November 1847 anticipating a discussion at their next meeting a few days later. ‘Give a little thought to the Confession of Faith,’ Engels asked with reference to the first draft, suggesting that ‘we would do best to abandon the catachetical form and call the thing Communist *Manifesto!*’ (Engels 1982a: 149). Engels said he would bring the other draft with him. This second draft, entitled *Principles of Communism*, was, he conceded, presented ‘in simple narrative form, but wretchedly worded, in a tearing hurry’ (Engels 1982a: 149).

Engels was being rather unfair to himself; the drafts were actually very focused and concise. It is, however, the case that his dry and unemotional prose was hardly attractive. Marx resolved this problem as he rewrote the manifesto quickly, readying it for publication in February 1848, a date that coincided with the beginning of the revolutionary uprisings in Paris and in a number of other European cities. Marx’s lively, rhetorical style gave the pamphlet a sense of urgency, transforming it into a very readable and quotable document (Martin 2015).

The style which Marx employed indicates that he took very seriously Engels’ suggestion to call the pamphlet a manifesto. It was transformed from a set of questions and answers into a lively political document, written with the intention of rallying the proletariat at a time when revolutionary uprisings were brewing (Lamb 2015: 4). Before turning to a few examples of that style it should be noted that, although Marx’s prose was crucial to the *Manifesto*’s eventual reputation as one of the great political works of the modern era, some key points are clearly traceable to Engels’ drafts (Engels 1976a; 1976b). For example, the following sentence in *Principles of Communism* makes concisely a point that Marx’s far more stylistic prose presented at greater length. The proletariat was a class, Engels (1976b: 341) suggested, which, ‘procures its means of livelihood entirely and solely from the sale of its labour and not from the profit derived from any capital; whose weal and woe, whose life and death, whose whole existence depend on the demand for labour, hence, on the alternation of times of good and bad business, on the fluctuations resulting from unbridled competition.’ Engels thereby laid firm foundations for Marx’s skilful creativity.

In the *Manifesto* Marx and Engels pulled together ideas they had together been formulating and articulating since they began to collaborate in 1844. One such idea posited history as primarily determined by class struggle—at each stage of history one or more social classes harnessed the productive forces and thereby benefited from an exploitative socio-economic system at the expense of other classes. Marx and Engels began to argue that the present, capitalist-dominated, stage of history was the last to be characterised by class struggle. A revolutionary proletariat would harness the forces of production which had been fostered and developed by the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie would thence be removed from the position of economic power that enabled it to exploit and oppress the proletariat. In countries such as Germany where capitalism was at a relatively early stage of development, Marx and Engels advised, the proletariat would first have to participate in revolutions to empower the bourgeoisie and thereby assist the development of productive forces (Blackburn 1977: 29-34). The progression, driven by those forces, through different historical periods characterised by relations of production would later be considered by Marx as a guiding thread in his studies and described by Engels as the materialist conception of history.

The *Manifesto* begins with a *reductio ad absurdum* devised by Marx to attract the attention of readers who may have been familiar with folk tales such as those the Brothers Grimm had popularized over the past few decades. ‘A spectre is haunting Europe,’ Marx declared on the first page, ‘the spectre of communism’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 481). He exposed the absurdity of the tendency, hugely successful at the time, to frighten ordinary people away from communism and socialism by making these movements appear to be driven by evil. Thereafter, several prominent themes can be found. First is the epoch of the bourgeoisie, in which the capitalist class dominated the economy, society and thereby politics. Marx predicted this epoch would be brought to a close when productive forces became so advanced that the exploitation on which capitalism relied would no longer be tolerated. This brings us to the next broad theme: class struggle and the proletarian revolution. Members of the proletariat would need to organize themselves to transform the exploitative society into one which would meet their needs. Differences in the composition of classes meant this process would vary among countries.

Another theme of the *Manifesto* is the weaknesses and shortcomings of previous and existing variants of socialism. In the 1840s socialism was considered to be a movement for moderate reform. Marx and Engels used the term ‘socialist’ pejoratively to describe various reformist literature including that of the anti-bourgeois aristocracy. Scathing of almost all the previous socialist and communist arguments, theories, schemes and plans, they divided them into three broad, progressively less backward looking, categories. The first was reactionary socialism, which comprised feudal socialism, petty-bourgeois socialism and German or ‘true’ socialism. ‘True socialism’ adopted French revolutionary ideas and applied them universally in a philosophically and politically empty manner. Concerned with abstract ‘Man’ and the universal love of mankind rather than real human beings, the ‘True’ socialists lacked revolutionary enthusiasm and precision. The second category was conservative or bourgeois socialism, which sought to redress social grievances and thus to preserve the existing bourgeois society. The third category was critical-utopian socialism or communism, which opposed the present conditions of the working classes, but failed to see what needed to be done politically. In attempting to achieve social harmony, the ‘Utopians’ such as Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Henri-de Saint-Simon, did not recognise that class struggle was unavoidable. Even the more radical, non-Utopian communists such as Gracchus Babeuf who did voice proletarian demands advocated crude levelling and austerity, failing to understand that productive forces needed to be sufficiently advanced for communism to work.

These socialists and communists, Marx and Engels argued, neglected the realities of the class-dominated epoch and misunderstood the needs of ordinary people. Marx and Engels outlined the post-revolutionary measures that would be required to begin to meet those needs in a transitionary stage before a fully communist society could be built. These measures amounted to state control and planning of vital production and services, restriction on property ownership and substantial, graduated taxation. Anybody considering how to bring about this transitionary stage would first, however, need to be persuaded that capitalism should be replaced by means of revolution. Hence, before turning to the post-revolutionary measures, Marx and Engels stressed that the Communists, who possessed the necessary theoretical knowledge of class dominance, class struggle and the historical process, were also ‘practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others…’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 497).

For the purpose of illustrating class dominance one of the most well-known sentences in Samuel Moore’s widely published English translation of the *Manifesto* (approved by Engels) was created: ‘The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 486). This was obviously a rhetorical generalization designed to ensure the *Manifesto* served as a political intervention, a campaigning pamphlet, indeed a manifesto. As is the case with the best political rhetoric, the *Manifesto* was creative with what appeared to be the truth; it did not purposively project an untruth. Marx and Engels were not presenting the bourgeoisie simplistically as an undivided class. A close look at this alongside another English translation helps verify that, very carefully and effectively, they were presenting a quite sophisticated argument. Consider the word ‘committee’ in Moore’s translation. A committee acts with a degree of autonomy from those it represents (Fraser and Wilde 2011: 194). The state might take the side of one segment or more of a class over others, but in a way that thereby manages the interests that all in the class share (Hoffman 1993: 174-6). Terrell Carver translates the sentence as: ‘The power of the state is merely a device for administrating the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie’ (Marx and Engels 1996: 3). Although a device does not necessarily have autonomy, the stress on common interests is in this translation still crucial to the sentence. Further verification of his understanding of the bourgeoisie as less than monolithic appears a few pages later. Moore’s translation stresses that, in its struggle, the proletariat ‘compels legislative recognition of particular interests of the workers, by taking advantage of the divisions among the bourgeoisie itself’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 493). Similarly, according to Carver’s translation, the proletariat ‘compels the recognition of workers’ individual interests in legal form by taking advantage of divisions within the bourgeoisie itself’ (Marx and Engels 1996: 10). Marx saw the bourgeoisie as a complex class with divisions but, nevertheless, one with a broader purpose.

Having drawn attention to the positions of the competing classes in the existing society, Marx and Engels turned to a weakness in the bourgeois hold on power, intending thereby to show that the dominant class could be unseated. Hence, another widely-known phrase in the standard Moore translation of the *Manifesto* was the following: ‘All that is solid melts into air’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 487). It is questionable whether this made the most effective use of Marx’s point, or whether it actually detracted from its potential efficacy. Carver’s translation, which says in effect the same thing but in less vague terms, is as follows: ‘Everything feudal and fixed goes up in smoke’ (Marx and Engels 1996: 4). Marx believed the bourgeoisie would soon undergo its own demise. It could continue to exist only by ‘constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 487). The process of revival could not go on indefinitely. Eventually the old, seemingly permanent relations would be swept away along with their prejudices and opinions. The words ‘All that is solid melts into air’ thus generate a mental image of vaporization and a sense of the temporary nature of each situation as the rapid development of productive forces takes its course. As this process progressed, Marx and Engels argued metaphorically, the bourgeoisie forged the weapons which would be used against them. Generating an image of witchcraft they said the bourgeoisie was ‘like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 490). The bourgeoisie had ‘called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons … the proletarians’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 490). The bourgeois had thus produced ‘its own gravediggers’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 496).

The *Manifesto* was, nevertheless, distinctly unsuccessful in its authors’ attempt to persuade the workers that the moment to turn those weapons against the bourgeoisie was rapidly approaching. After the uprisings of 1848 had been quelled, even Marx and Engels lost interest in the pamphlet. Indeed, although in April 1848 Marx received notice from Engels (1982b: 173) that he was hoping soon to finish an English edition, it would be two more years before Helen Macfarlane’s English translation was published in the *Red Republican* newspaper. Unfortunately for Marx and Engels, the first of three instalments in November 1850 began by stating that a ‘frightful hobgoblin’ (Marx and Engels 1850: 161), rather than a ‘spectre,’ was haunting Europe. The pamphlet, furthermore, had little impact in the two decades that followed (Herres 2015: 26-7; Carver 2015: 68-9).

The *Manifesto* was revived in 1872 with a new edition (Carver, 2015: 68-74). The German authorities had inadvertently rekindled interest by lifting censorship in order to claim that August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht drew on the pamphlet in what was portrayed in court as their subversive conspiracy (Lamb 2015: 134-5). As further new editions were published after Marx’s death in 1883, the *Manifesto* gradually gained notoriety as a Marxist classic—something of which its authors would never have dreamt in 1847-8 (Carver 2015: 74-76). The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 triggered the most prolific circulation of the *Manifesto* as the Soviet Union and its international communist network made cheap editions and reasonably priced selected works available for purchase in much of the world (Lamb 2015: 137-9). The Soviet regime, however, replaced the call for self-emancipation of the proletariat with the authoritarian guidance of a centralised vanguard (Townshend 2015: 94-8).

The *Manifesto* was published in many English language editions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, often with introductions by eminent scholars including Harold Laski, A.J.P. Taylor, Eric Hobsbawm, Frederic L. Bender, Jeffrey C. Isaac and Gareth Stedman Jones. One of the more imaginative editions, published in the USA with an introduction by the American Marxist William Schneiderman (1948), included large, cartoon illustrations on every other page of the abridged *Manifesto*, portraying particular points in twentieth century pictorial terms. In such ways its value in terms of rhetoric and propaganda continued to be utilised.

Perhaps the most interesting passage for many readers of the *Manifesto* today is that in which it identifies the early stages of what is today described as globalization. In the bourgeoisie’s search for new markets that would, unbeknown to the particular capitalists, enable it to thrive and indeed survive, the bourgeois system expanded around much of the world. In this process Marx identified both progressive tendencies and the maintenance of the old exploitative ones in an uneasy relationship. The bourgeoisie had ‘through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 488). As it did so the old industries, organized within narrow geographical boundaries, went into decline. New wants were encouraged and satisfied by the importation of products from locations around the world.

Although it criticized Western aggression the *Manifesto* in parts reflected the patronizing and Orientalist western culture and attitudes of the day. The bourgeoisie had, one sentence declared, drawn ‘all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 488). As mentioned above, the *Manifesto* did, however, identify a progressive aspect of international capitalism. ‘National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness’ had through improvements in production and communication ‘become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 488). More generally, its authors identified exploitation as a core feature of capitalism, the concealment of divisions between exploiting and exploited classes and the roots of the current processes of globalization very clearly and concisely. Some of the features of international capitalism which they discussed are still recognizable today: constant expansion and variation of exploitative processes without regard to human consequences; demonization of the left in response to challenges to class dominance; the stunting of productive forces which could benefit people in need; the treatment of human beings as commodities; but also the portents of capitalist demise. The *Manifesto* is thus still worth reading in the twenty-first century.

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