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A Lesson in Revolution: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

Julian Wright

We have seen above, that the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy.

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible.

Of course, in the beginning, this cannot be effected except by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production; by means of measures, therefore, which appear economically insufficient and untenable, but which, in the course of the movement, outstrip themselves, necessitate further inroads upon the old social order, and are unavoidable as a means of entirely revolutionising the mode of production ...

When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character. Political power, properly so called, is merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another. If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organise itself as a class, if, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class.

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.¹

Marx's idea of revolution as a fundamental change in social conditions, arising from the eternal struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor, is notoriously ambiguous. Did he mean to suggest that the change would always be effected through a forceful takeover of power? Or was that simply the necessity he foresaw in the mid-nineteenth century, given that the ultimate goal was for a more harmonious existence, the association that would promote the free development of each and thus the free development of all?

This ambiguity in *The Communist Manifesto* connects with the ambiguous context of socialism – and Marx's socialist activity – at the moment when the text was produced. The subtlety of Marx's commentary has lent itself to generations of reflection on the fundamental qualities of social struggle and social transformation as a driving force in history – since the late nineteenth century, that is. As Gareth Stedman Jones points out in his major essay on *The Communist Manifesto*, one of the key challenges for the reader of this enigmatic text is to see past the many layers of twentieth-century discussions of the text, to try and grasp its purpose and function in the 1840s. One of its most important developments was Marx's own decision to discard the format of a 'socialist catechism' and instead write a 'manifesto' that would allow a more discursive historical overview to develop through the text. This was itself a response to the historical mood of the 1840s, in which the significance of the French Revolution was developed more and more in historically informed political thought and through which the coming 1848 revolutions would in turn develop a rich historical meaning in their own time.²

Soon after its publication, rapidly moving political events would force the *Manifesto's* authors to shift their positions more than once, during the crisis of the 1848 revolutions. As regimes tottered on the continent, Marx took up a position that would conflict with the grand historical overview he set out in Section I of *The Communist Manifesto*. Here, Marx and Engels argued that the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the appropriation of their property by the organized, unified working class was paramount in socialist thought, action and militancy. Soon, however, they were campaigning for the uniting of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. As revolution turned to defeat after the June Days in France, however, they returned to the original proposition, this time as pessimists rather than optimists. They had accepted that the overthrow of bourgeois capitalism was more necessary than ever, given the craven qualities of bourgeois leadership in 1848; but the contest with the bourgeoisie was seen as being darker and more bitter.

This double shift away from the positive, rallying cries of *The Communist Manifesto* gave the tone to the European socialist movement from the 1860s and 1870s, when German socialism in particular shaped socialist culture as a means of educating the working class. In the context of the later nineteenth century, social struggle between the middle classes and the working classes would be imprinted on the mind of socialist commentary and socialist activism as a fundamental feature of the modern European experience, notably through the bloody end to the Paris Commune in 1871.

The aftermath of those events provided the context for the first renewal of interest in *The Communist Manifesto*. The text was produced by a German court as evidence of the dangerous threat of the socialist movement at the trial of German Social-Democratic leaders in March 1872. The trial gave new publicity to a text which had almost disappeared from view, and Marx and Engels took the opportunity to present it with a new preface. They now questioned their original commitment in Section II of the *Manifesto* to an abrupt seizure of power on the part of the proletariat:

In view ... of the practical experience gained, first in the February revolution, and then, still more, in the Paris Commune, where the proletariat for the first time held political power for two whole months, this program has in some details become antiquated. One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that 'the working-class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.'³

So, in 1847–8, Marx and Engels proposed that the working class would seize the levers of the state; but in 1872 they repudiated this? How can we grasp the importance of *The Communist Manifesto* if major historical and political statements such as this were to be turned upside down by their authors?

The Manifesto was above all a tool for rallying and educating a tight group of activists who moved between the Rhineland, Belgium, Paris and London. The trenchant, sharp-edged tone of the document, which comes across so strongly in the sardonic descriptions of other socialists in the third section of the text, should not simply be seen as a feature of Marx's personal style, angry and cutting as it was. This tone points to the central function of the text. *The Communist Manifesto* was an instrument that would carve out clear lines between the Communist League, a tight group of activists on whom Marx and Engels had attempted to impose their authority, and the confused and disparate socialist movement in Europe in the 1840s. As Engels would reiterate in 1888, that

was a movement where a range of doctrines and political positions could be covered by the banner 'socialism', including elements of conservative thought that focused on social activism as a way of buttressing traditional systems of order. Marx engaged at length with German and French social thought in the 1830s and 1840s and his aim in *The Communist Manifesto* was to provide a framework through which communist activists could interpret that intellectual kaleidoscope – and mark themselves out from it.

Thus the purpose – to give identity and direction to the communist movement – helped to dictate the mode: a manifesto with trenchant political commentary and historical overview woven together. The trick of a phrase such as this is to give the impression that an eternal lesson in society and politics is being preached, one which future militants need to learn by heart:

If the proletariat ... by means of a revolution makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally.

The enduring fascination of the *Manifesto* throughout the early twentieth century stems to a considerable extent from the belief of future revolutionaries – in Russia, China and many other parts of the world – that phrases such as this contained the key to understanding the revolutionary programme of action.

As Marx would later explain, however, this sort of prognosis was not the main force of the text. The key purpose of the *Manifesto* was to create better understanding and better appreciation of the philosophical and historical context of modern socialist activity.

What I did that was new was to prove (1) that the existence of classes is only bound up with particular, historic phases in the development of production; (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to classless society.⁴

So, the *Manifesto* was not so much an instruction to action as an instruction to a better understanding of history. Marx's large theoretical conceptions throughout the 1840s were consistently framed within a debate, often with a specific author or small group of activists. *The Communist Manifesto* was no different.

The polemics that Marx had entertained with other socialist leaders such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Wilhelm Weitling in the mid-1840s explain the force of *The Communist Manifesto*. The controversy with Weitling demonstrated

that Marx and Engels wanted to emphasize the idea of class self-knowledge on the part of the proletariat. Where Weitling, after his return from prison in 1845, preached an increasingly vague philosophy of class reconciliation, they wanted to show the workers how capitalist economic evolution was driving the classes into an inevitable collision. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels set out a long and devastating attack on the way German left-wing thought had been conceived. By 1846 they had established that the principal task for communist thinkers and activists was to create a consensus among communist and socialist organizations, using their scientific view of the class struggle as the basis for further expanding the proletariat's understanding of its position in the economy and in history.

Marx and Engels were insistent: propaganda needed to be controlled, if necessary stopped, because the poorly led workers' movement was in danger of having its hopes raised and then dashed by repression. Thus a purge of ill-constructed socialist formulae would lead to the expulsion from the movement of socialists who did not understand the real nature of revolutionary tactics. And fundamentally, the bourgeoisie would have to act first. Bourgeois democracy would be vital to the proletariat in the first instance. The Russian observer Amenkov described a telling scene. After Weitling had stumbingly attempted to answer the charge that his movement was led by idle hopes and vague platitudes, Marx's fist crashed to the table and his fundamental concern – that which underpinned his whole outlook – exploded from his mouth: 'Ignorance never did any one any good!'⁵

The French socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon would long suffer from the crushing blows of Marx's scientifically worked-through philosophical critique, which, Marx wanted to show, demonstrated the fundamental weakness of Proudhon's intellect. The two tussled closely in 1846–7. Proudhon foresaw (as later French commentators, including Jean Jaurès, would also agree) that Marx's understanding of revolution entailed the progressive misery of the working class, until such time as the capitalist system collapsed in on itself.⁶ But the logical focus of his argument was dismantled by Marx's reply to his 'Philosophy of Misery'.⁷ For Proudhon, the evil effects of competition needed to be replaced by a campaign to develop co-operation between the workers. Ultimately, Marx would argue, Proudhon was nothing more than an ameliorative socialist – someone who basically wanted to improve the system they found themselves in, rather than truly challenging it and working for its destruction. The brutality of the attack was striking, but the importance of rhetorical violence of this sort needs to be understood properly. In Marx's

riposte, the workings out of his theory of historical materialism took another step forward.

In his sharply drawn account of Karl Marx, Isaiah Berlin suggested that Marx was a man who was not in tune with his age. Ideas of sympathy, sensitivity, heroism, personal experience and the whole issue of how an individual life was lived within social upheavals were of fundamental concern to the radicals, socialists, romantics and nationalists of the days leading up to the 1848 revolutions.⁸ The capacity for Proudhon or Weitling to appeal to the mass movements of Western and Central Europe depended on their being in tune with these sentimental revolutionary qualities. But, as Berlin put it,

Karl Marx ... lacked psychological insight ... this extreme blindness to the experience and character of persons outside his immediate range made his intercourse with the outside world seem singularly boorish ... he looked upon moral or emotional suffering, and spiritual crises, as so much bourgeois self-indulgence unpardonable in time of war.

Understanding the irascibility of Marx's dealings with the other socialist writers and activists of the 1840s is a fundamental part of appreciating the drive, rhythm and intensity of *The Communist Manifesto*. It points out that when he began to push for the organization of the Communist League, he did so as a man at cross purposes with so many of those he encountered. The point of this activity, as he saw it, was to put in place a framework that would provide an unalterable scientific structure to the way workers encountered the ideas of communism. This was the occasion for *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, which members of the League were keen to see completed by early 1848. Begun by Engels, the work was rewritten, precisely to make it more forceful. This was not a manifesto for all times and places: it was a trenchant lesson for European socialists. This necessitated a strident and critical style, which could push out the cloudy, emotional rhetoric of the diverse utopian and other socialist ideals then current, replacing them with pointed and cogent understandings of how world history was evolving and of the place of the communist movement within that history. The drama of the opening sentences, and the twist towards the bourgeoisie, can only be understood properly as the slicing of a muddy debate with a sharp rhetorical flourish. That rich and chaotic debate between left-wing European intellectuals of the pre-1848 era is what frames this document. In order to hack through the verbiage of this debate, Marx emphasized his points in pungent statements that gave a dramatic account of world history. It was this rhetorical grandeur that made the text so apt, in later generations, to inspire a

much wider, global attempt to construct a movement which would overthrow the capitalist economic system.

Was *The Communist Manifesto* a revolutionary text? Marx himself argued (just before the passage set out here) that his idea of communism was certainly a 'radical rupture with traditional property relations' – far more radical, indeed, than those ideas about property purveyed by his sparring partner Proudhon. Overall, the *Manifesto* was less a revolutionary tract, perhaps, than a text that sought to inform and shape understandings of a certain sort of revolution. The re-emergence of the *Manifesto* in the late nineteenth century as a later inspiration for a wide range of ideas of revolution should not, however, prevent us from seeing that Marx's fundamental aim was to prevent socialist revolutionaries embracing anything other than a properly scientific, historically informed view of revolution as the outworking of the forces of economic evolution and class struggle. And because so many of his closest colleagues in left-wing circles thought of revolution as something altogether more dynamic, more apt to be propelled and directed by emotional, fraternal and voluble groups of workers or others, our conclusion as to the revolutionary qualities of *The Communist Manifesto* must ultimately be that it was a very odd sort of revolutionary text in the 1840s. The distinctly awkward place it has in terms of Marx's own immediate political future in 1848 – where his ideas about the necessary course of action would change so quickly – is simply the natural corollary of understanding the *Manifesto*'s real purpose.

Where the *Manifesto* did touch on a genuine notion of revolution was in the rather rare passage we have examined here, which comes near the end of part two. Perhaps because the most important point of the *Manifesto* was to draw the gaze of fellow socialist activists away from deceptions and distractions, the moments when Marx focuses more carefully on the future are few and far between. Famously, there is very little in Marx's whole work to give socialists or communists, of his own day or subsequently, much idea of what a post-revolutionary future might look like. The 'free association of all' will in time replace the need for state and bureaucracy, creatures as they are of capitalism. It is only here that one of the key principles of Marx's theory of human experience in history makes its presence felt: the idea of individual human beings 'alienated' from their true nature was developed clearly in a number of Marx's writings during the 1840s. Here then there is a glimmer of the liberation of humans from their pitiful existence within capitalism. But so much of Marx's work – and the whole essence of *The Communist Manifesto* itself – was to try to bring the proletariat to a position of understanding, where it would avoid simply perpetuating and

reinforcing the capitalist system that was every day creating alienation. Getting that idea into people's heads was ultimately far more important, in Marx's view, than distracting them with cloudy visions of the future; the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s had already been clogged up with such notions.

So these few sentences that give us a glimpse of Marx the visionary do not in the end define our response to the text a hundred and seventy years later. Understanding Marx's place in the cut and thrust of a movement which he worked so hard to master is a much more fruitful place to begin as we engage with this demanding, dramatic and didactic masterpiece of political literature. Its revolutionary qualities are complex, but above all it is a warning against revolution for the sake of upheaval. Upheaval, on a grand historical scale, must happen first – then and only then will the revolutionary process unfold. In the meantime, the working class needs to be imbued with understanding more than with fervour. Nonetheless, fervour, of a revolutionary kind, is there in every line of this text. It is there to drive the point home and cut through the hothouse atmosphere of the socialist and communist debates of the 1840s.

Further Reading

The most important recent commentary on *The Communist Manifesto* is:

Stedman Jones, G., 'Introduction', to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2002).

Three important biographies of Marx:

Berlin, I., *Karl Marx* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939).

McLellan, D., *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1973).

Sperber, J., *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (London: Norton, 2013).