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Review

The Communist Manifesto 160 years later

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What remains from the Communist Manifesto in 2008, one hundred and sixty years after its publication? As David Harvey observes in his brilliant preface to this edition, the present financial crisis corresponds in an astonishing way to the predictions of Marx and Engels: “the society of the ‘too much’, of ‘overproduction’ and excessive speculation, has plainly broken down and reverted, as it always does’ to a ‘state of momentary barbarism’”.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/png/387px-Communist-manifesto.png>]

Cover of the Communist Manifesto’s initial publication in 1848 in London.

Of course, certain arguments in the Manifesto had already become obsolete in the lifetime of their authors, as they recognised themselves in numerous prefaces. Others have become so in the course of our century, and require critical re-examination: Euro-centrism, the idea of an “inevitable” victory of the proletariat, the absence of ecological critique. But the general tone of the document, its central nucleus, its spirit – something like the “spirit” of a text does exist – has lost none of its strength and vitality.

This spirit results from its simultaneously critical and emancipatory quality, that is the indissoluble unity between the analysis of capitalism and the call for its overthrow, between the study of the class struggle and engagement with the class of the exploited, between the lucid examination of the contradictions of bourgeois society and the revolutionary utopia of a society based on solidarity and equality, between the realist explanation of the mechanisms of capitalist expansion and the ethical demands to “overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence”. [1]

In many respects, the Manifesto is not only current, but more current today than 160 years ago. Let’s take for example its diagnosis of capitalist globalisation. Capitalism, say the two young authors, is in the process of forging a process of economic and cultural unification of the world under its leadership: “The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. (...) In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production.”

It is not only about expansion but also domination: the bourgeoisie “compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.” Indeed, in 1848 that constituted much more an anticipation of future tendencies than a simple description of contemporary reality. It is an analysis which is much truer today, in the epoch of “globalisation”, than 160 years ago, at the time of the editing of the Manifesto.

In fact, capital has never succeeded as it has in the 21st century in exerting a power so complete, absolute, integral, universal and unlimited over the entire world. Never in the past was it able, as today, to impose its rules, its policies, its dogmas and its interests on all the nations of the globe. International financial capital and multinational companies have never so much escaped the control of the states and peoples concerned. Never before has there been such a dense network of international institutions - like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation - devoted to controlling, governing and administering the life of humanity according to the strict rules of the capitalist free market and of capitalist free profit. Finally, never at any time prior to today, have all spheres of human life – social relations, culture, art, politics, sexuality, health, education, sport, entertainment - been so completely subjected to capital and so profoundly plunged into the “ in the icy water of egotistical calculation”.

Add to this that the Manifesto is much more than a diagnosis - now prophetic, now marked by the limits of its time – of the global power of capitalism : it is also and above all an urgent appeal for international combat against this domination. Marx and Engels had perfectly understood that capital, as a world system, can only be vanquished by the world historical action of its victims, the proletariat and its allies.

Of all the words of the Manifesto the last is undoubtedly the most important, that which has captured the imagination and the heart of several generations of socialist and worker militants: "Workers of the world unite!" It is not by chance that this interjection has become the flag and the password of the most radical currents of the movement over the last 150 years. It amounts to a cry, a summons, a categorical imperative both ethical and strategic, which has served as compass through wars, confused confrontations and ideological fogs.

This call was also visionary. In 1848, the proletariat was only a minority in society in most European countries, not to mention the rest of the world. Today, the mass of wage workers exploited by capital - workers, employees, service workers, temporary workers, agricultural workers – is the majority of the population of the globe. It is by far the main force in the class combat against the world capitalist system, and the axis around which other struggles and other social actors can and should be articulated.

In fact, the stakes do not only concern the proletariat: it is all of the victims of capitalism, the set of socially oppressed categories and groups - women (rather absent from the Manifesto), dominated nations and ethnic groups, the unemployed and excluded (le "povertariat") – of all lands who are interested in social change. Not to mention the ecological question, which does not affect this or that group, but the human species as a whole.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of socialism, the class struggle and even history was decreed. The social movements of recent years, in France, Italy, South Korea, Brazil or the USA – in fact, everywhere in the world – have brought a stinging refutation of this kind of pseudo Hegelian elocubration. What the subaltern classes dramatically lack, on the other hand, is a minimum of international coordination.

This review of [Pluto's edition](#) will appear in the next issue of Socialist Resistance.

[1] K. Marx, Contribution to the critique of Hegel's philosophy of right, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>