

### **Chapter 3      The Communist Manifesto After 150 Years**

How can a book written in one historical epoch have a meaning for another? If the author has tried to answer the questions posed by the way of life of the people around him, what can these answers mean for those living under changed conditions and facing quite different questions? [1] In the case of Karl Marx, we have yet another barrier to penetrate. At the end of the twentieth century, when we pick up a text like the **Manifesto**, we already have in our minds what ‘everybody knows’ about it. Before we even glance at its pages, distorting spectacles have been placed on our noses by the tradition known as ‘Marxism’. And, even today, Stalinism’s obscene misuse of the word ‘communism’ still colours everything we read.

The upholders of ‘Marxism’ thought of it as a science, and at the same time declared it to be a complete world outlook. These claims, which clearly contradict each other, make it impossible to understand the task Marx set himself, a task that, by its very nature, no body of ‘theory’ could complete. For his aim was no less than to make possible ‘the development of communist consciousness on a mass scale’. It was not enough just to prepare the overthrow of the ruling class. This particular revolution required ‘the alteration of humans on a mass scale ... because the class overthrowing [the ruling class] can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages.’ [2]

So the first step was not a ‘political theory’, not a ‘model of society’, not simply a call for revolution, but a conception of humanity. What Marx aimed at was simultaneously a science that comprehended human development, an understanding of how that development had become imprisoned within social forms that denied humanity, and a knowledge of the way that humanity was to struggle to liberate itself from that prison. Indeed, only through the struggle for liberation could we understand what humanity was. In essence, it was that ‘ensemble of social relations’ [3], which made possible free, collective, self-creation. He showed how modern social relations fragmented society and formed a barrier to our potential for freedom, while at the same time providing the conditions for freedom to be actualised.

If we want to understand the **Manifesto**, we must read it as an early attempt to tackle all of these issues, set within the framework of a political statement. More clearly than any other of its author’s works, it contradicts the ‘Marxist’ representation of Marx as a ‘philosopher’, an ‘economist’, a ‘sociologist’, a ‘theorist of history’, or any other kind of ‘social scientist’. To grasp what he was doing, we have to break through all the efforts of academic thinking to separate knowledge from the collective self-transformation of humanity. Indeed, one of the tasks of the **Manifesto** is to lay bare the source of all such thinking, finding it precisely within humanity’s inhuman – alienated - condition. Marx’s science situates itself inside the struggle to transform our entire way of living.

Of course, in the past fifteen decades, the forms of capital and the conditions of the working class have changed profoundly in innumerable ways. But we still live in the

same historical epoch as Marx, and, if we listen to what he has to say, we shall discover him to be our contemporary. So let us attempt to remove those ‘Marxist’ spectacles, which prevented us from seeing just how original was Marx’s conception. Then, perhaps, we shall be able to confront this product of nineteenth-century Western Europe with the agonising problems of today’s ‘globalised’ society. The essence of the **Manifesto** is not merely relevant for our time; it is vital for us, if humanity is to grope its way forward.

## **The Communist League**

The **Communist Manifesto** was written in a Europe that was on the eve of the revolutionary upheavals of 1848, and that also still lived in the shadow of the revolutionary struggles of 1789-1815. It is a response to both of these, the storm to come and the one that had passed. Between 1844 and 1847, in Berlin, Brussels, Paris and Manchester, Marx and Engels had encountered the ideas of the various groups of socialists and communists, and had also studied the organisations of the rapidly-growing working class. Hitherto, these two, socialism and the working class, had been quite separate from, or even hostile to each other. The achievement of the **Manifesto** was to establish the foundations on which they could be united and transformed.

From this work came a new conception of communism, situated within the historical context of their time. As the **Manifesto** puts it, communism was not ‘based on ideas or principles that have been invented or discovered by this or that would-be universal reformer.’ [**Communist Manifesto**. MECW, Volume 6, p 498.] It had to be seen as the culmination and meaning of working-class struggle, and this struggle itself provided the key to understanding the existing economic relations. The ‘Marxists’ thought they found in the **Manifesto** a ‘theoretical’ analysis of ‘capitalism’ and a ‘theory of history’. Actually, Marx was scornful of all pretence of having a ‘supra-historical theory of history’ [4]. He never used the word ‘capitalism’ and spent his life writing a critique of the very idea of political economy.

Every line of the **Manifesto** is permeated with his conception of communism. This was not a plan for an ideal future social set-up, worked out by some reforming genius, to be imposed on the world by his followers. Instead, it was to be the outcome of the development of the working-class movement itself, and therefore arose within the existing social order. Marx had turned towards the ideas of communism in 1844, Engels preceding him by two years. For three years, they discussed - and argued - with the many socialist and communist sects in Germany, France, Belgium and England, but joined none of them. Then, in 1847 they decided to join together with some former members of one of these secret groups, the League of the Just.

The League, which was largely German, and which had mainly consisted of workers and artisans [5], had more or less disappeared by that time. Its old members had outgrown the ideas of their leading figure, the heroic founder of the German workers’ movement, Wilhelm Weitling, and come closer to Marx’s view of communism. Marx and Engels, on

the basis of their new-found ideas, resolved to bring these people together in a new kind of organisation. On one thing they were quite determined: this was not going to be a secret society, like the conspiratorial sects that abounded throughout Europe. It would be an open organisation, with a clearly expounded programme and outlook. The Communist League was formed at a conference in London, in the summer of 1847. A newspaper, the *Kommunistische Zeitschrift*, issued by the London branch in September of that year, carried the slogan 'Proletarians of all Lands, Unite!' In November, a second conference assembled. After ten days of discussion, Marx was instructed to prepare a 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', based upon Engels' draft 'catechism', the **Principles of Communism**. Marx's work was not finished until early in February, 1848. (As usual, he made slow progress in carrying out their instructions, and the delay brought forth an angry letter from the Committee.) Before printing was complete, the insurrection had broken out in Paris.

What role did the Communist League play in the revolutionary events of 1848-9? As an organisation, almost none. Its individual members, of course, were to the fore in many parts of Europe. Marx and Engels, in particular were leading figures in the Rhineland, where they produced the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. But, as a body, the League itself did not function during those stormy years. In 1850, after the defeat of the movement, exiles in London made an attempt to re-form it, but soon a fierce dispute broke out among them. Willich, Schapper and others dreamed that the revolutionary struggle would soon break out again. Marx and Engels and their supporters were convinced that the revolutionary wave had passed, and that a long period of development of capital would ensue. In 1851, leading members of the League in the Rhineland were arrested and tried in Cologne. After that, the organisation was allowed to disappear. Marx deliberately cut himself off from the exile groups, and did not resume active political involvement for the next twelve years.

### **The Manifesto and the Class Struggle.**

The first thing to note about this document is that it begins and ends with declarations of openness: 'It is high time that Communists should openly ... publish their aims. ...' and 'The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims.' Marx was always totally opposed to the idea that social change could be brought about by some secret group, working behind the back of society. This tendency, identified with the heroic but ineffectual conspiracies of Auguste Blanqui and his friends, was also the target of Marx's much-misunderstood phrase 'dictatorship of the proletariat', first used by him four years later. In 'Marxism', the central meaning of this formula was badly distorted. Quite contrary to any modern connotation of tyranny, Marx wanted to stress that the entire working class must govern, as opposed to any secret group, however benevolent its intentions.

‘The history of all hitherto existing society has been the history of class struggles.’ So runs the famous opening of the first section, ‘Bourgeois and Proletarians’, but what does this mean? (Engels’ 1888 footnote, excluding pre-history from this statement, does not really help. [6]) As is well known, the idea of class struggle as a way of explaining history was not invented by Marx, but had been employed by French bourgeois historians in the 1820s. Marx gives it a totally different content. For him, class struggles are an aspect of alienated society, and communism implies their disappearance.

It is quite wrong to read this section as if it presented history as a logical argument, with a deduction of the communist revolution as a conclusion. Ten years later, Marx depicted human history in terms of three great stages:

Relationships of personal dependence (which originally arise quite spontaneously) are the first forms of society . . . Personal independence based upon dependence mediated by things is the second great form, and only in it is a system of general social exchange of matter, a system of universal relations, universal requirements and universal capacities formed. Free individuality, based on the universal development of the individuals and the subordination of their communal, social productivity, which is the social possession, is the third stage. [7]

Of course, in 1848, Marx was not able to put the matter so clearly, but already the essence of his point of view is precisely that expressed by these lines. The class struggle was for him a feature of the second of these ‘stages’ only, and bourgeois society marked the end of this entire period. This was the phase of ‘alienated life’, where individuals had no control over their own lives. Only in this stage could you speak about ‘historical laws’, since individuals were not yet the governors of their social relations. The **Manifesto**’s paean of praise for the achievements of the bourgeoisie refers to their (of course, involuntary) work, which prepares for the great advance of humanity to its ‘third stage’, communism. This will see human beings living as ‘social individuals’, ‘universally developed individuals, whose social relationships are their own communal relations, and therefore subjected to their own communal control.’ [8] Thus Marx’s entire picture of the movement of history is bound up with his conception of a ‘truly human’ society, and the obstacles to it within our existing way of life.

Marx does not present us with a static picture of bourgeois social relations, as a sociologist might try to do. Instead, he gives a succinct outline of the birth, development and death of an oppressive and exploitative social order. He shows how ‘the bourgeoisie . . . has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors’, and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than ‘callous cash payment’.’ [486-7] The class struggle, which has raged over the centuries, has been simplified by the modern bourgeoisie. ‘Society is splitting up more and more into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. [485]

This opening section of the **Manifesto** is concerned with the joint historical development of these classes, including the struggle between them, and the stages of this process are related to the development of modern industry. Thus the huge advances of human productive powers since the eighteenth century have taken the form of the growth of ‘new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.’ [487] The outcome is that ‘man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind’. Just as the development of these ‘means of production and exchange’ outgrew the feudal relations within which they had developed, now, the powers of modern industry have collided with the bourgeois relations that have ‘conjured them up’. [489] Now, Marx describes the growth of the proletariat,

the class of labourers who live only so long as they find work, and who find work on as long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity like every other article of commerce. ... Owing to the extensive use of machinery, the work of the proletarian has lost all individual character, and consequently all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine.[490]

The account of wage-labour given here is far from the developed analysis Marx was able to make in **Grundrisse**, ten years later, and, after still another decade’s work, in **Capital**, but it still gets to the heart of the matter.

What is unprecedented about this particular form of class struggle, Marx explains, is that it prepares the objective ground for the transcendence of classes as such, and of all forms of oppression.

All the preceding classes that got the upper hand sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation. The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other mode of appropriation. ... The proletariat cannot raise itself up without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air. [495]

Throughout the **Manifesto**, Marx stresses the ‘cosmopolitan character’ of bourgeois society, reflecting the development of a world market. ‘The need of a constantly-expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe.’ It is because of this that the struggle of the proletariat, while national ‘in form’, is international ‘in substance’. [495]

Marx’s account of bourgeois society as the objective preparation for the proletarian revolution is bound up with the emergence of the consciousness necessary for the transformation of the whole of world society. The ‘Marxists’ attributed to Marx a philosophical outlook called ‘historical materialism’, a way of ‘explaining’ the world. This was sometimes presented as a mechanical model of history, in which ‘material conditions’ caused changes in consciousness. But this directly contradicts what Marx

himself was doing. After all, was he not engaged in the struggle for the development of consciousness, and wasn't communism precisely the way for humanity to take conscious charge of history?

Bourgeois society, the last possible form of the class struggle, had also to bring forth the subjective elements needed for its conscious transcendence. Central to this is 'the organisation of the proletarians into a class and consequently into a political party', and that means its self-organisation. But that is not all. In a vitally important paragraph, Marx describes how the break-up of the old order, and of the ruling class itself, has another consequence:

A small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift and joins the revolutionary class, the class which holds the future in its hands ... in particular a portion of the bourgeois ideologists who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending the historical movement as a whole. [494]

This is a remarkable passage. These 'bourgeois ideologists' undoubtedly include Marx and Engels themselves. In 1847, how many others could there have been? Never before had an author been able to put himself into the picture in this way, explaining the origin of his own work in terms of the objective conditions it was investigating. Thus the objective, material development of modern industry is bound up with the development of the understanding of the need to emancipate these forces from the perverting power of capital.

When Marx speaks of the proletariat, he does not mean the members of a sociological category, the collection of those who can be labelled as 'wage-earners'. He is talking about a real movement, an objectively founded, living aspect of modern social life. People who sell their ability to labour find themselves involved in an antagonistic relation to the owners of capital, whether they like it or not, and whatever they may think. 'The proletarian movement is the independent [9] movement of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority.' [495]

Obviously, many of the details of the picture of the world presented by Marx in 1848 are hardly to be found in the world of today. As Marx himself realised a short time later, his time-scale was extremely foreshortened. But, a hundred and fifty years on, it is amazing how many of its essential features are still at the heart of our problems.

## **The Role of the Communists**

The second section, 'Proletarians and Communists', largely consists of an imaginary dialogue with a bourgeois objector to the idea of communism. It begins by situating the Communists in Marx's picture of the development of the proletariat. Many of its ideas are drawn from the doctrines of previous socialist and communist groups, and also from

Engels' draft. But, working from the standpoint set out in the previous section, he transforms them into something quite new.

The members of the League gave their declaration the title '**Manifesto of the Communist Party**'. They could not anticipate how much misunderstanding this word 'party' would cause for future decades, when it had so changed its meaning. For Marx and his comrades, it certainly did not mean the type of bureaucratic structure with which we associate it today, but a section of society, a social-political trend. Again stressing the open, anti-conspiratorial nature of communism, Marx declares

The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement. ... The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all the other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of power by the proletariat. ... The theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property. [498]

Objects have been privately owned for millennia, so that individuals have been able to say of something, or even somebody, 'this is mine'. But the latest form of private property is different. Capital is 'a collective product', set in motion only by 'the united action of all members of society ... not a personal, but a social power.' [499] Abolishing this power, capital, is the only way to ensure that 'accumulated labour becomes a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer.'

Marx goes on to summarise the communist critique of the false bourgeois conceptions of freedom, individuality, culture, the family and education, attacking in particular the oppression of women within bourgeois society. After this, he outlines the nature of the proletarian revolution, 'to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class, to win the battle of democracy', and identifies the resulting state with 'the proletariat organised as the ruling class'. [504]

The 10-point political programme for the first steps of the revolution with which this section ends, is interesting mainly for its surprisingly mild character. Clearly, Marx does not consider revolution as a sudden overnight transformation, resulting from some kind of *coup d'état*, however violent it might be. He refers to the situation following a prolonged historical transition, 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.' [504] Then, he anticipates, 'the public power will lose its political character'. The proletariat will 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.' [506]

This latter sentence summarises a world of ideas Marx has extracted and negated from the history of philosophy and political economy. It embodies his entire conception of what it means to live humanly. Potentially, humans can be free, but only when the freely created life of the whole of society is completely and visibly bound up with the growth of each individual. Private property stands as a barrier to such freedom.

The third section of the **Manifesto** deals scornfully with most of the previous socialist doctrines, all of which have by now long disappeared from history. However, its final pages refer to 'Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism' with great respect. Marx attributes the limitations of the work of Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen and others to the fact that it unconsciously reflected the 'early undeveloped period ... of the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie'. While being 'full of the most valuable materials for the enlightenment of the working class', they could see the proletariat only as 'a class without any historical initiative or any independent political movement', as 'the most suffering class'. Because, in their time, 'the economic situation ... does not offer them the material conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat', they could do no more than 'search after a new social science, after new social laws, that are to create these conditions'. That is why they could be no more than 'Utopians', who merely painted 'fantastic pictures of future society'. [515] In contrast to them, Marx insists that communism is a 'real movement', not a dream.

## The Subject of History

Marx's problem was to discover the possibility for humanity, individually and collectively, to take conscious charge of its own life, and to find this possibility within bourgeois society. Communism would mean that humans would cease to be prisoners of their social relations, and begin purposively to make their own history. In other words, we should cease to be mere objects and start to live as subjects.

But how can history have a subject? The course of the twentieth century, especially its last decades, makes the idea seem quite ludicrous. The world presents the appearance of pure chaos, without the slightest sign of conscious direction or purpose. The lives of its inhabitants are evidently quite out of their control. At the same time as they are ever more closely bound together, they appear more and more like a collection 'of single individuals and of civil society' [10], at war with each other. In other words, they are objects rather than subjects. People living under capital, both bourgeois and proletarians, are governed by it; people are treated as things, and things have power over people. Capital, not the human individual, possesses subjectivity. Marx starts from the conviction that this way of life is not 'worthy of their human nature'. [11]

The notion of the 'subject' had been central for the work of Hegel. For him, a subject was at the same time a thinking consciousness and a will. It created objects which stood in opposition to itself and then tried to find itself in them. In this effort, it changed its relationships with them, and so made itself what it really was. This was what Hegel understood by freedom: something was free only if it produced its own conditions of existence, and was not governed by external presuppositions. Overcoming the opposition of the objects it had produced, the subject could recognise itself in a world it had made for itself. Subjects, when their individual purposes clashed at a particular phase of development, revealed that their modes of being were deficient. From knowledge of this deficiency, a new set of relations arose, and so a new subject at a higher level.

The efforts of each individual to realise his or her purpose led to results quite different from what they had intended, because a higher subject called 'History' played cunning tricks upon them. From civil society, that war of property-owners against each other, sprang the State, whose subjective activities reconciled the warriors on this 'battlefield of private interest' [12]. All of this was the work of Spirit, 'the subject which is also substance', described as 'I that is 'we', 'we' that is 'I' [13]. Here is the starting point of Marx's debt to Hegel, as well as Marx's critique of Hegel.

Marx saw that Hegel's notion of subjectivity was an upside-down reflection of something else: although humanity made itself in the course of social labour - 'in changing nature, man changes his own nature' [14] - under the power of capital, this took place in an upside-down world. That is, we develop our physical and mental capacities as social beings in the process of production itself, but we do so only as prisoners of our alienated

social relations. Trapped by the power of capital, the actual producers are prevented from comprehending or controlling either what they produce, or their own productive activity. Capital is the subject, not the individual, whether bourgeois or proletarian.

This insight into the nature of bourgeois society, and the position of the producers within it, enabled Marx to go beyond Hegel's understanding of history. The conscious, united action of the workers against capital would lead to the abolition of private property. They could become conscious of their own humanity, and break out of that inhuman situation in which it was denied. Transforming itself from a class 'in itself' into a class 'for itself', the united proletariat would become the subject of history, and in this it differed from all previous, propertied, classes. The cunning which enabled Hegel's History to play tricks on humanity could be defeated. The way would be opened to a human society, where life would be made consciously, by individual humans who no longer clashed with the collective will of humanity as a whole.

These conceptions are hostile to any form of dogmatism. However, what 'Marxists' used to call 'theory' was no more than dogmatic assertion, for it could never explain its own origin. Even during Marx's own lifetime, he saw his ideas being reduced to dogma, and later things became much worse. In the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy and its devotees, 'Marxism' became a kind of state religion. Even those who fought against Stalinism, notably Leon Trotsky, found themselves trapped inside this conception of the 'Marxist Party', which was equipped with a set of correct theories or 'doctrines'. [15] They were led, often unconsciously, to see 'revolutionary leadership' as the substitute for that 'development of communist consciousness on a mass scale', which was Marx's aim. As we have seen, the **Manifesto** explicitly opposes the conception of such an organisation.

Thus the famous formulation of Kautsky and Lenin, that 'socialist consciousness' had to be brought into the working class 'from without', was a barrier to the central meaning of the **Manifesto**. But even those who did not accept this formula lost sight of Marx's starting-point for the movement of the proletariat, the standpoint of 'human society or social humanity'. [16] Marx argued that the communists, participating in the real movement, could become its mouthpiece, illuminating the self-activity in which the class will 'become fitted to make society anew'. [17]

The 'Marxist' conception, that the revolution was the work of a party, was closely bound up with the way the 'Marxists' viewed state power. For them, the first step was the 'seizure of power' by their 'party'. They tried to portray Marx as a 'state socialist', just as his enemy Bakunin claimed he was. They often remarked that, in the **Manifesto**, Marx's understanding of the state was 'incomplete'. (Marx would have agreed with this, at any rate, for, as we have seen, he regarded his own ideas on any subject as essentially incomplete.) His remark that 'the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class, to win the battle of democracy', was certainly troublesome for many 'Marxists'. In fact, Marx came to envisage the rule of the proletariat as operating through local communes, not through a centralised state

power. This conception, reinforced by the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871, was essential to his notion of communism as the self-movement of the proletariat. [18]

Thus 'Marxism' came, in effect, to treat both the workers' state and the revolutionary party as if these were the subjects of history. They were thought of as moral agents, operating independently of the individuals whose life-activity actually comprised them. This outlook was directly opposed to the view for which Marx fought. For him, only the proletariat, united as a class, can become conscious of its own historical situation, and consciously transform it. No other social formation can take its place - not the nation, not any earlier class, not the Party, not the family, and certainly not the individual genius. Such entities purport to be self-creating subjects, but Marx shows that these were illusions, which necessarily arise out of alienated life itself. In particular, living under bourgeois private property, isolated individuals see themselves as independent subjects and the state as the community. These are misconceptions, 'false consciousness'.

This, then is how Marx sees the question of subjectivity. Private property breaks up the community, and this renders it impossible for individuals to control their own lives. But, in its struggle against capital, the proletariat can transform itself into a self-conscious subject. After class divisions have been abolished, the proletariat will transcend itself, and dissolve into humanity as a whole. Then we shall have a free association of social individuals, that is, individual subjects, each of whom directly embodies the whole community, in which, the **Manifesto** says, 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all'.

Look again at this famous phrase, which so clearly expresses Marx's fundamental notion of humanity. It was a symptom of the widespread misunderstanding of Marx, that it should have been read back-to-front, as if it made the connection between individual and collective precisely the other way round. Communism means that the well-being of the individual, the possibility for him or her to develop freely all their human potential, is the condition; the good of the whole community is the consequence. While Marx criticised the political economists for their celebration of the 'single individual in civil society', his critique did not merely reject this entity. The overthrow of the power of capital will open the way for the flowering of true individuality, but now in a shape where it no longer precluded collective well-being, but made it possible. The individual subjects who live in a human world will not be 'isolated individuals' but 'social individuals'. [19]

That is why Marx's work, both scientific and practical, was not a matter of propounding a new form, one which the world had then to adopt. Instead, it concerned the removal of the inhuman covering [*Hülle* = 'integument'] which encased and constricted a truly human life. Communism was not a new 'mode of production', to replace the existing one, but a release of individuals' lives from the straightjacket of private property.

Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it. ... In the place of all physical and mental senses there has come therefore the sheer estrangement of all these senses, the sense of having. ... The

abolition of private property is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities. [20]

Thus this emancipation, spearheaded by the subjective action of the proletariat, the ‘universal class’, implies far more than can be summed up as ‘the overthrow of capitalism’, or a new economic and political system. It means a new way of living, in which individual and universal no longer collided.

## Marx in the Twenty-first Century

Today, millions of people greet the new century with apathy, fear or despair. A deep malaise grips world society. Science and technology bound forward, bringing new marvels at every stride, but the outcome is mass unemployment, environmental destruction and the ever-present menace of nuclear war. Those shrill cries about 'the End of History' and 'the New World Order', which filled the air only a few years ago, have all died away. Soon, I hope, their authors will be forgotten.

If Marx wrote when Europe was still coming to terms with the French Revolution, we live in the shadow of the Russian Revolution. Millions expected this great event to begin the socialist transformation of world society. But in its aftermath of civil war, bureaucratic degeneration destroyed these aspirations. Finally, the Soviet state collapsed into the chaos of modern capital. Unsurprisingly, the assertion that 'Marxism is dead' has become a cliché. However, the chief result of the disappearance of the 'Cold War' situation is something quite different. We used to be presented with the false choice between two alternatives: either rigidly-centralised state control, or the exploitative anarchy of the market. Now, we can break out of this false dilemma. The path has been opened for the renewed study of Marx's actual ideas.

Just look at the world at the end of the millennium. Every aspect of social, political and economic life is dominated by the dogmatic belief in the miraculous power of 'market forces'. Money and its surrogates rule supreme throughout the planet, not just in a few bourgeois states. The outcome of this development is clear for all to see. Millions of lives are spent in the shadow of poverty and insecurity, menaced by the constant threat of starvation and disease. Some of the poorest people in the world exist within sight of gleaming office buildings, which house the headquarters of transnational corporations and powerful financial institutions. The export of the latest high-tech weapons of destruction vies with the massive trade in illegal narcotics as the chief sustenance of this soulless structure. The mass media, a major part of the profit-making system, broadcast images of famine and war around the globe, carefully integrating them into the profitable business called 'entertainment'.

No doubt, the world has passed through similar social crises before. One thing which distinguishes this 'New World Disorder' from its predecessors is the way it is intellectually and culturally reflected. Whether the idea is put into words or not, there is a widespread belief that 'there is no such thing as society'. The conception of humanity itself has been perverted. Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Bhopal are accepted as symbols of *homo sapiens* in the twentieth century. Truth, Goodness and Beauty have not merely vanished: they are loudly proclaimed to be illusions. The possibility of a world where 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' has, we are often told, become utterly unthinkable. The hopes of the Enlightenment, the nineteenth century certainty of Progress, the struggle for world revolution after 1917, the dreams of the

student revolutionaries of 1968, all are dismissed as outmoded juvenile nonsense. To people whose horizons are limited by 'market forces', the corruption we see around us is only an accurate expression of 'the human condition', and there is nothing to be done about it.

We have seen the revival of a widespread belief that present-day social relations are the only ones possible, and that the anticipation of 'a free association of producers' is incompatible with human nature. But just what is that nature? Many answers are forthcoming. The practitioners of Artificial Intelligence explain that humans are nothing but rather complex machines. 'Just a bundle of selfish genes, genetically-programmed talking apes', intone the high priests of socio-biology. 'Self-interested atoms', gibber the economists. 'Murderous, natural polluters of the planet, which was getting on quite well until you humans arrived', rage the Greens.

Have the forms of capital not changed enormously? Yes, indeed they have, but only into shapes far more horrific and insane than those of Marx's day. The making of money out of money now appears to dominate those operations of capital in which use-values are actually produced, while these forms of capital suck the blood of the producers. During twenty-four hours of every day, billions of dollars are sent over powerful computer networks, bringing massive profits to speculators in foreign exchange. Productive capacity itself is moved rapidly to areas where labour-power is cheap. Meanwhile, in the older centres of large-scale production, factories lie rusting, and the communities who depended on them are broken up and left without hope.

Thus the main questions posed by the **Manifesto** face us more starkly than ever. How is it that human productive power - now expanded far beyond the dreams of Marx - can take forms through which humanity's environment is destroyed and its very future existence threatened? How can social relations like money or capital have power over the people they relate to each other? Why do the links that bind the entire productive potential of humankind into a unity, simultaneously shatter it into fragments, setting individuals, classes and nations against each other, even against themselves? Chatter about 'postmodernity', with its denial of humanity, cannot drown out such questions.

Of course, in 1848, and in a brief document like the **Manifesto**, Marx could do no more than point to such problems. Even his work over the subsequent 35 years did no more than begin to elaborate answers to some of them, while new dangers have shown themselves only in recent decades. When 'Marxist' orthodoxy pretended that these beginnings were a complete theoretical system, it lost sight of its essential point. What Marx was looking for - not inside his head, but within the existing social forms themselves - was the way for humanity to begin its task of self-emancipation, of becoming what it really was. This is what the Enlightenment and the French Revolution had promised, but failed to deliver. Marx was able to transcend this outlook. He did not reject its promise, but revealed that the world of capital, which political economy had portrayed as 'natural', was in reality crazy [*verrückte*]. Looking at the world today, who can deny its madness?

Many of those disillusioned with the socialist idea present their demand to 'Marxism', as if they were historical debt-collectors. 'You promised us a revolution - where is it? The **Manifesto** told us that the proletariat's victory over capital would open the road to freedom. We have been cruelly disappointed.' We must totally reject this manner of looking at history. Those who are disillusioned are obliged to investigate how they came to acquire illusions in the first place! In any case, there is no way we can evade the problem of how to live together on the planet. This is not a problem for a set of doctrines to solve, or for a political tendency to answer, but for billions of human beings to tackle for themselves.

The working-class movement has certainly gone through huge changes since 1848, especially over the past few decades. After the Second World War, the advanced industrialised countries set up systems of state welfare, together with a certain amount of state ownership. Sometimes this was associated with the name of John Maynard Keynes, and occasionally - and quite misleadingly - it was called 'socialism'. After the period of unprecedented economic growth had come to a shuddering halt in the 1970s, the so-called 'neo-liberalism' became the prevailing mood of many governments. There was an idea that state-ownership of industry, or state intervention in the economy, would provide a way to raise the standard of living. By the early 1980s, it had vanished with astonishing speed. Of course, the identification of socialism with state ownership was always false. For Marx, the state was 'the illusory community' [21], a bureaucratic structure which, within the framework of the fragmented, money-driven society, falsely impersonated the community.

A major feature of the world today is the fragmentation of the international working class and its organisations. During the 1980s, many sections of the workers' movement retreated into purely defensive actions. The movement of capital in search of higher profits led to the decline of large-scale manufacturing industry in the older capitalist countries, considerably weakening the trade unions there. This process has led some observers to imagine that 'the proletariat no longer exists', or that we are living in the epoch of 'post-capitalism'. Of course, such ideas are absurd. The substance remains: capitalist exploitation of labour; only its forms have changed.

New sectors of industry have opened up in what was once called the 'Third World'. There, the widespread employment of women and children, under the harshest working conditions, have brought back many features of economic life that had been long-forgotten in the older centres of industry. At the same time, in these older countries, the work-force has been split into two increasingly contrasted sectors. On the one hand, there is a relatively well paid group, employed in high-tech industries. On the other, a large section is forced into poorly-paid jobs, or frequent unemployment. They are pushed to the margins of society, condemned to falling standards of housing, health and educational provision.

As these changes unfolded in the 1970s and '80s, new working-class struggles began in Asia, Latin America and Africa. New masses have been drawn into global battles against the power of capital. Important struggles to defend communities against the effects of changing technology have taken place. But how can the class be re-united? I think that the ideas of the **Manifesto** will prove to be vital in answering this question. When Marx looks at the struggles of workers for a higher price for their labour-power, or for a shorter working day, he sees this as a form, the content of which is the struggle of the dispossessed to be recognised as human beings. This demand, the essence of Marx's communism, is the only possible foundation on which to rebuild the working-class movement. In 'Marxism', communism and the movement of the proletariat were torn apart, after the **Manifesto** had so brilliantly unified them. To heal this breach is the task facing us today.

It is clear that the difficulties faced by the world are bound up with the breakneck speed of technological advance, and its imprisonment with the constricting framework of capitalist exploitation. The **Manifesto** already compared 'bourgeois society [which] has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange' with 'the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells'. [489] Today, this does not merely mean that capital is beset by economic instability. Far deeper problems have emerged as a result of the conquests of science and technology. Every advance in telecommunications, information technology, biotechnology or medical science sharpens the conflict between the requirements of capital and the needs of humanity. If these powers are not to destroy us, a complete transformation of social and economic life is needed, a total change in the way that human beings relate to each other.

The threat to the environment, a direct result of capital's uncontrolled expansion, can be answered only by the collective action of humanity as a whole. But what is this whole? Where can it be found? The 'Green' movement has done important work in drawing attention to environmental issues. However, it often evades the question of just who is going to answer these dangers. Technology is not the enemy, but its perversion by the power of capital. Obviously, Marx could not have had much to say directly about issues which had hardly shown themselves in his time. But we will not be able to search for solutions without his conception of the potentiality of the proletariat to transform itself into a subject and emancipate humanity from capital.

In organising itself to fulfil its historic destiny, the working class has to achieve the necessary knowledge of its situation, and face its tasks as a class with the highest degree of consciousness. As the international workers' movement rebuilds and re-unifies itself, it must continually check its practices against the ideas of the **Manifesto**, not as a biblical text, but as a guide. The movement must also re-work and de-mythologise its past history, both its victories and its errors, while it grasps the changes in the way that capital organises itself. It must become aware of the latest technological developments, finding ways to answer the problems of working-class communities with knowledge of the most advanced conquests of natural science and technology. The working class movement

must take the lead in fighting to halt the effects on society as a whole of capitalist exploitation of the natural environment.

But for all this, those of us who claim to be communists have to ask ourselves a question. How on earth did we, the 'Marxists', so totally misunderstand Marx? Of course, it was not just a matter of intellectual inadequacy. It was really because we forcibly squeezed Marx's notion of what was truly human into an iron framework which was truly brutal. We examined writings like the **Manifesto**, as if they were academic texts, expounding a total, complete, immutable doctrine. We thought that they provided us with a 'model' of history, whose components were abstract images of Marx's categories. We were afraid to see them as the concrete expression of the lives of human beings. Only now, after the century after Marx's, do the opportunities open up for a new generation to grasp their real significance. Now is the time to read the **Manifesto**.

Certainly, the working class has still to 'become fitted to make society anew'. [22] That implies that, in the new millennium, the issues which found their first expression in 1848 face humanity with far greater urgency. Today we can say that we either learn how to live humanly, or we shall cease to live at all.

## NOTES

**MECW = Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Collected Works.** London, 1975-.

[1] That Marx himself was interested in this question seems likely, even if he never had the opportunity to discuss it at length. See the closing pages of the 1857 Introduction to *Grundrisse*.

[2] **The German Ideology**, written a year earlier, but not published until the twentieth century. **MECW**, Vol. 5, p 53.

[3] **Theses on Feuerbach**. Thesis 6.

[4] See the letter Marx wrote in November, 1877, to the Russian journal **Otechestvennyye Zapisky**.

[5] Wilhelm Weitling had been a tailor, like Georg Eccarius and several others. Karl Schapper had been a student of forestry. Heinrich Bauer was a shoemaker. Joseph Moll was a watch-maker. Karl Pfänder was a painter of miniatures. Marx, Engels and Wilhelm Wolff seem to have been the only intellectuals. My account of the history of the League is based on that of David Ryazanov, which contradicts some of Engels' reminiscences. See Ryazanov's Edition of the **Manifesto**, (New York, 1930), and his lectures, **Marx and Engels**, (London, 1927).

[6] Engels' idea of 'primitive communism', based on the researches of Haxthausen, Maurer and Morgan, was not really shared by Marx. See **The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx**, edited by L Krader. (Assen, 1974.)

[7] *Grundrisse*. **MECW**, Vol. 28, p 95.

[8] *Ibid*.

[9] A later edition inserted here the word 'self-conscious'.

[10] **Theses on Feuerbach**. Thesis 8.

[11] **Capital**, Volume 3. Penguin Edition, p 959.

[12] Hegel, **Philosophy of Right**, para 289.

[13] Hegel, **Phenomenology of Spirit**, p 1

[14] **Capital**, Volume 1, Chapter 7. This is where the key opposition - and similarity - of Marx to Hegel, is located. The words 'materialism' and 'idealism' were used by 'Marxists' in a quite misleading way. Marx had no concern with the 'theory of knowledge', or with the 'relationship of mind and matter'.

[15] Karl Kautsky wrote a book, once very popular in the labour movement, entitled **The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx** - but only after Marx's death. Plekhanov and Lenin followed Kautsky in this usage.

[16] **Theses on Feuerbach**. Thesis 9.

[17] **German Ideology**, **MECW**, Vol. 5, p 53.

[18] See Notes on Bakunin's **State and Anarchy**, 1875. See also **The Late Marx and the Russian Road**, edited Shanin.

[19] I am indebted to a discussion with Professor José-Carlos Ballon, of San Marco University, Lima, for this important point.

[20] **Paris Manuscripts**. **MECW**, Vol. 5, p 300.

[21] **German Ideology**, **MECW**, Vol. 5, p 46.

[22] **German Ideology**, **MECW**, Vol. 5, p 53.