THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO AFTER 150 YEARS

by ELLEN MEIKSINS WOOD

The *Communist Manifesto* is just that: a manifesto. It is not a long and comprehensive scholarly study but a public declaration of a political program, a short and dramatic statement of purpose and a call to arms, written at a time of political ferment, on the eve of what turned out to be the nearest thing the world had ever seen to international revolution.

Yet posterity has judged this political manifesto not just as a manifesto but as many other things. In the century and a half since its publication, it has been judged not only as a uniquely influential document in the theory and practice of revolutionary movements throughout the world, but also as a work of history, as economic, political, and cultural analysis, and as prophecy. The *Manifesto* has been judged as an account of past, present, and future—not only the present and future of its authors but those of every generation since, up to and including our own.

At first glance, it seems very unreasonable to judge a small pamphlet—the product of collaboration by two young men very early in their careers, written for a very specific and immediate purpose—by such demanding measures. It is hard to think of any other classic of Western social thought that has been judged by such sweeping and rigorous standards. The *Manifesto* stands alone in this respect no doubt because of its tremendous role in the history of a vast political movement which has had an

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irreversible influence on the shape of the modern world. More particularly, the *Manifesto* has been subject to uniquely critical scrutiny because people in power, and their intellectual supporters, have felt that much was at stake in debunking it.

But only a very great work—which still has much to say to us 150 years later—could invite this kind of critical scrutiny. Nothing could give more convincing testimony to the genius of the *Manifesto* than the energy that has been expended in attacking it. So while we have to remember the particular purposes for which it was written and the very specific historical context in which it emerged, it seems not so unreasonable after all to judge it in much larger terms.

The Historical Context of the Manifesto

Let us first consider the context in which the *Communist Manifesto* was written and how the specific historical conditions of its composition affected its content.

The broad historical context of the *Manifesto* is, of course, the emergence of industrial capitalism and the modern industrial working class in Western Europe, together with the socialist movements that grew out of these historical developments. There had been earlier classics in what would become the socialist tradition—such as the work of Winstanley in seventeenth century England or Babeuf in eighteenth century France—but the social movements with which they were associated, while influential in various ways, remained on the margins of history. It was only in the nineteenth century that substantial working class movements emerged that could form a powerful political force and even socialist parties. With the appearance of this new political force came a body of socialist literature. First, there was a diverse collection of writings often treated together (largely thanks to the *Manifesto* itself) under the category “utopian socialism,” by thinkers such as Owen, St. Simon, and Fourier. These writings would be overtaken by the far more penetrating and systematic works of Marx and Engels, whose socialism was deeply rooted in a critical analysis of capitalism of a kind never attempted before. The *Manifesto* is certainly not the most substantial of these works, but it is without doubt the most well known, with a historical resonance probably unsurpassed by any other single piece of secular writing, from any part of the political spectrum.

Yet though the *Manifesto* was composed against the background of those larger, long-term historical developments, it had a more immediate context which helps to explain its particular shape. The pamphlet was commissioned by the German Communist League in 1847. Friedrich Engels (at age 27) first drafted *Principles of Communism* (also included in this edition). He handed it over to Karl Marx, then 29, for revision. Drawing on Engels' *Principles*, Marx produced the theoretical and literary masterpiece we now know as the *Communist Manifesto*, which was first published anonymously in London in February 1848.

This was the year when revolution would sweep across Europe—almost immediately after the publication of the *Manifesto* (though obviously not because of it). Spreading like wildfire from France to Germany to Hungary, Italy, and beyond, the revolution covered an area that today takes in at least part of ten different European countries, with effects as far away as Latin America. In just a few weeks, one government after another fell. These revolutions were to be very short-lived, but it is hard to over-estimate the hopes and fears they aroused as signals of an international revolution.

The *Manifesto* was written just before the outbreak of the revolution. Although it cannot be said that the pamphlet played a major part in the events that followed, it is a product of that very specific time and that very specific revolutionary climate. In that historical fact lie both many of its strengths and some unresolved problems.

The revolution, or revolutions, of 1848 took place in countries with very diverse social, economic, and political conditions: from a relatively "developed" country like France, or parts of Germany (not yet a single unified state) such as the Rhineland, to "backward" areas like southern Italy or Transylvania. But one thing they had in common was that capitalism was not well advanced in any of them, and in some cases not at all. For all their differences, too, they all had predominantly rural populations. Britain, the country in which capitalism was most advanced, certainly saw eruptions of popular unrest and state repression in the 1840s, but it did not experience the revolutionary upheavals that occurred on the Continent. There was a mass political movement in Britain too, the Chartist movement, but its political struggles (for instance, the struggle for an

extension of the franchise to the working class, which would be won some time later) were being overtaken by new kinds of class struggle. The growth of industrial capitalism was already shifting the central terrain of class conflict from the political arena to the workplace, the "point of production."

If the various Continental revolutions had a common political program, it was not the overthrow of something like a capitalist system. It was rather the establishment of unified liberal or constitutional states with a degree of civil equality, inspired above all by the French Revolution in the previous century. In some cases, like Hungary or Italy, the struggle for a more democratic state was bound up with the fight for national autonomy.

But if 1848 was not a socialist or anti-capitalist revolution, neither was it unambiguously a "bourgeois revolution" in the now commonly understood sense: a revolution to liberate capitalism from feudal constraints. The revolutionary "bourgeoisie" was not a coherent capitalist class. Prominent among them were civil servants, professionals, and intellectuals. Even in countries where industrialization was more advanced, the industrial bourgeoisie which opposed the dominant regime was small and relatively weak, never able to act alone against the ruling elite without the support of popular forces with different material interests.

In all these cases, too, the popular forces, the people who fought and died in the streets, the people who pushed the revolution beyond the political objectives of the "bourgeois republic" or the liberal state toward more far-reaching social transformations, were not a modern mass proletariat. They included independent craftsmen, small shopkeepers, peasants in some places (like Italy, and even some parts of Germany), and the unemployed or underemployed poor in towns with undeveloped economies still unable to absorb them. Nowhere in revolutionary Europe was there a massive and developed proletariat, a sizeable class of wage-laborers employed by capital such as already existed in Britain. The nascent proletariat, especially in France and more developed parts of Germany, had an effect disproportionate to its numbers, but it could not yet provide the social base for a successful revolution.

For that matter, there may have been no solid social base even for a "bourgeois democratic" revolution. The revolutionary movements relied, to varying degrees, on mass mobilization.

Yet it was precisely the dangers of mass mobilization that quickly drove bourgeois liberals and radicals everywhere away from democracy, or even liberalism, and back to rigid hierarchy, order, and reaction. It might be said that the revolution both erupted and failed because no single class was strong enough to sustain a stable regime of its own.

At any rate, when Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto*, they did not believe that a socialist revolution, or a proletarian revolution of any kind, was in the offing. They briefly hoped that the events, and the failures, of 1848 might lead to something more, some further longer-term development, a "permanent revolution" that would push beyond the bourgeois republic to proletarian rule and finally socialism. But any reader of the *Manifesto* must be struck by the fact that the revolutionary hero of its eloquent narrative is the bourgeoisie.

The revolutionary victories of the bourgeoisie were, of course, deeply contradictory for Marx and Engels, combining benefits and costs in equal measure. They hoped, and confidently expected, that the bourgeoisie's conquests would eventually be overtaken by the triumph of the working class and socialism. But even while the *Manifesto* calls workers to arms and foresees their emergence as a truly revolutionary force, it tells the triumphal story of the bourgeoisie.

"Bourgeois" or "Capitalist"?

It is commonly acknowledged that the "bourgeois revolution," with the French Revolution of 1789 as the guiding light, forms the background of the *Communist Manifesto*. But what exactly does this mean, and what are its consequences for the argument of the *Manifesto*?

We cannot make sense of this classic without understanding that the setting of its historical narrative is not an advanced capitalism. The point is not simply that the pamphlet was written in the mid-nineteenth century rather than at the end of the twentieth. It is not just that Marx and Engels were talking about an earlier stage of capitalism than the one we inhabit. The immediate context of their narrative is not even the most advanced capitalism of their own day. They are writing against the background of revolutionary ferment generated by social forces and struggles that have as much to do with pre-capitalist formations as with capitalist social relations: no

just wage-laborers pitted against capitalist employers, but non-privileged against privileged classes, common people (including bourgeois) against aristocracy, the nation against monarchy, peasants against landlords, even serfs against masters, and everywhere the hungry poor against the rich.

This is where we come to some interesting tensions in the *Manifesto*. It is a manifesto of communism, of proletarian revolution against capitalism. As a call to socialist struggle, it has never been surpassed in its passion, its eloquence, its depth. It is also a powerful and prophetic analysis of capitalism, which still stands unrivalled as a portrait of the capitalist world in which we live today, even on the brink of the twenty-first century. But the *Manifesto's* immediate political inspiration belongs to a different world, very unlike the capitalist world it so vividly portrays.

Marx's projections of the capitalist future are remarkable enough even in relation to the most advanced capitalism of his day. But if Britain was the model for his analysis of the capitalist system, it was not the inspiration for the *Manifesto's* story of the bourgeoisie as a revolutionary *political* force—a force that would, in turn, launch the career of the proletariat as a revolutionary class.

The narrative of bourgeois revolution portrays the bourgeoisie as a class which, at every stage of its development, was obliged to struggle against the forces of reaction. It began, says Marx, as an oppressed class fighting against the feudal aristocracy and, only after centuries of class struggle and advance, ended with its own modern representative state. In all these battles it was obliged to enlist the support of laboring classes, and finally to drag the modern proletariat into the political arena, giving the working class the weapons to conduct its own struggle against the bourgeoisie. This bourgeoisie also bequeathed to the working class the most progressive aspects of its ideology: critical, anti-clerical and anti-superstitious, liberal and up to a point egalitarian—in other words, the culture of the Enlightenment.

This portrait of a politically progressive bourgeoisie, anti-aristocratic to its core and more or less liberal, owes more to the history of Continental bourgeois struggles than to the development of British capitalism. The classic “bourgeois” struggle, the French Revolution of 1789, had little to do with capitalism. The

core of the revolutionary bourgeoisie did not consist of capitalists, or even of commercial classes of a pre-capitalist kind, but of office-holders and professionals. The revolutionary objectives of people like this had to do not with liberating capitalism but with aspirations to civil equality and "careers open to talent." These bourgeois objectives are not those of a society in which capitalist wealth is the highest goal. They were better suited to a society in which public office was a lucrative economic resource and the highest bourgeois career.

As for British *capitalism*, it was never simply, or even primarily, a "bourgeois" career. The British landed aristocracy was no less capitalist than were urban classes. Nor did capitalism establish itself in England by means of politically progressive "bourgeois" struggles against a reactionary aristocracy. Many large property owners in England, both landed and urban, had certainly fought against the king in the English revolution of the seventeenth century, when their partnership with the Crown threatened to give way to an "absolutist" monarchy; and they were obliged to resort to popular mobilization to achieve their anti-absolutist goals. In that struggle, they espoused certain principles of parliamentary rule and "limited" government, and the popular forces they unleashed (and soon suppressed) produced some of the most radically democratic ideas the world had ever seen. But the revolution was never a class struggle between a landed aristocracy and a rising bourgeoisie, capitalist or otherwise.

If capitalists in Britain were ever compelled to engage in class struggle to ensure their own class interests, it was not a struggle against a ruling class. In a sense, capitalists—at least agrarian capitalists—were *born* a ruling class in England. Even in the nineteenth century, when conflicts erupted between landed and industrial classes, they were essentially conflicts between two kinds of capital. If British capitalism required class struggle to free itself from political and economic constraints, it was primarily against subordinate classes, such as the small proprietors whose property rights (and sometimes dangerously radical ideas) interfered with capitalist accumulation.

So it was not really capitalists who supplied Marx with his principal model of a politically progressive bourgeoisie. Yet that progressive model did affect his view of capitalism. It is difficult to say how much his hopes for proletarian revolution were encour-

aged by this image of a politically progressive bourgeoisie which launched the proletariat onto the political stage and furthered its political development. But one thing seems clear: the picture of capitalism itself as a progressive force—which is so much a part of the *Manifesto's* story—is colored by the revolutionary career of the Continental, and especially the French, bourgeoisie.

We have to draw some distinctions in the *Manifesto* between the story of political, cultural, and ideological progress, on the one hand, and the analysis of material or economic development, on the other. Or, more precisely, we have to distinguish between those political, cultural, and ideological developments that are clearly associated with capitalist economic development and those that are not so clearly connected with capitalism. The different aspects of Marx's narrative, conflated in his own account, are typically lumped together by commentators, often under the general heading of "modernity." But it will make for a better understanding of capitalism if we try to disentangle some of the different strands in his narrative. This will bring out in sharper relief Marx's own remarkable, and to this day unrivalled, insights into the nature of capitalism.

It is not at all clear that the development of capitalism required, or brought into being, the best of Enlightenment principles. For instance, that part of the French bourgeoisie which in the eighteenth century adopted as its guiding ideology the Enlightenment commitment to human improvement, the improvement of the human mind, the eradication of ignorance and superstition, or the commitment to civil equality and "careers open to talent," was not in the main a capitalist class. It was a class of professionals, office-holders, and intellectuals, with material interests distinct from those of capitalists. It can even be argued that the mature development of capitalism has brought an end to that kind of bourgeoisie and its specific cultural formation.

In the twentieth century we know all too well that capitalism, while it certainly requires a "rational" (that is, an "efficient" or profitable) organization of production, has little need for "rationalism" in the best Enlightenment sense: the submission of all authority to the scrutiny of critical reason. Capitalism needs a disciplined and docile workforce. It has no need at all for a critical citizenry. In fact, a worker who has a habit of using her critical reason may be much more dangerous to the "rational"

organization of production (not to mention the power and property of capital) than would, say, a worker committed to some irrationalist superstition or certain kinds of religious fundamentalism which repudiate Enlightenment principles. Right-wing political movements in the U.S., for instance, have without any difficulty combined anti-Enlightenment values with a deep commitment to capitalism.

As for political progress, it is certainly true that feudal hierarchy and aristocratic privilege did, as Marx suggests, give way to the "modern representative state." In fact, since Marx wrote those words the "bourgeois" representative state has itself given way to something we now call "democracy." The bourgeoisie is not now a "ruling" class in the literal sense: its class dominance does not depend on exclusive access to political rights or on a clear and legally defined division between capitalist rulers and proletarian subjects. Workers are citizens with full voting rights, and capitalism has proved itself able to tolerate universal adult suffrage in a way that no other form of class domination has ever been able to do.

But this political advance has been deeply ambiguous. The ambiguity goes beyond the obvious fact that in capitalist "democracy" wealth still means privileged access to political power, or the fact that the state, as Marx and Engels maintained, generally acts in the interests of the capitalist class. Nor is it just that capitalism can readily tolerate, and sometimes needs, authoritarian rule. There is an even more fundamental contradiction in capitalist "democracy."

Capitalism can tolerate "democracy" because capitalists control the labor of others not by means of exclusive political rights but by means of exclusive property. Although capital needs the support of the state, workers are compelled to sell their labor power for purely "economic" reasons. Since they do not own the means of production, the sale of labor power for a wage is the only way they can gain access to the conditions of subsistence, and even to the means of their own labor. There is no immediate need for direct political coercion to make them work for capital. Purely "economic" compulsions are generally enough.

This means that even in its best and most "democratic" forms, capitalism can, and must, confine equality to a separate "political" sphere which does not, and must not, intrude into the economic sphere or subvert economic inequality. A kind of

democracy may prevail in the political sphere, but people in capitalist societies spend most of their waking lives in activities and relationships where there is no democratic accountability at all. This is true not only in the workplace, where they are likely to be under the direct control of others, but in all spheres of life that are subject to “market” imperatives.

So capitalism has created a political sphere governed by “democracy,” but it has at the same time, and by the same means, put large areas of human life outside the reach of democracy. In other words, much of what capitalism has given with one hand it has taken away with the other.

Marx’s analysis of capitalism is so rich precisely because it exposes the system’s fundamental contradictions. The tendency to conflate “bourgeois” and “capitalist,” and to tell their stories as a single story of “modernity” and progress, can obscure those contradictions. It may detract from those aspects of Marx’s analysis which give us an insight, sharper and deeper than ever before or since, into the nature of capitalist society. In his later work, and especially in *Capital*, Marx would provide a much more exhaustive analysis of capitalism. But in the few pages devoted to it in the *Manifesto*, in poetic and passionate prose yet with stark and penetrating clarity, he captures, as no one else has ever done, the essence of capitalism, with all its dynamism and destructiveness.

Capitalism and Historical Materialism

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbances of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois era from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations ... are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned....

In this, one of the most famous passages in the *Manifesto*, Marx sums up the nature of capitalism. Unlike all other earlier social forms, capitalism demands constant change, constant improvement of productive forces to enhance the productivity of labor in a constant quest for profit. The need for profit, the need to accumulate endlessly, is imposed on capital by the very nature of the system: it *must* accumulate, it

must maximize profit, just to survive. No earlier system was ever subject to such pressures.

This characterization of capitalism as a specific mode of production different from others is based on the principles of historical materialism, which Marx and Engels had been elaborating for several years and which they would develop more fully after 1848. Historical materialism begins with the simple proposition that human beings obtain the material conditions of their existence through specific and historically variable relationships with nature and with other human beings. The most basic fact about any form of social organization is the nature of those relationships, the specific ways in which any given society goes about providing the material conditions of existence.

There came a point in human history when the social organization of material life took the form of class divisions, the divisions between people who labored and those who exploited the labor of others. That division inevitably led to conflict, and since then history, the *Manifesto* proclaims, has been propelled by those class struggles, as exploited classes have resisted exploitation. But while class struggle has been a moving force of history since the beginning of class society, it has taken different forms in different societies. Each particular mode of production, each system of class relations, has its own internal logic, its own requirements, its own conditions of survival and success, its own dynamics, its own forms of conflict and struggle. And capitalism has very specific conditions that, unlike any previous mode of production, demand the constant revolutionizing of productive forces.

In *Principles of Communism*, Engels suggests that history from the beginning has been moved forward by the constant progress of productive forces, especially technological improvement, and that social relations have been compelled to adapt to these developing forces. This conception of technological progress, which owes much to the Enlightenment and to classical political economy, appears in the *Manifesto* too.

But in Marx's version, the emphasis is less on some transhistorical process of technological progress and more on the historically specific effects of particular social relations. His emphasis is above all on the ways in which the distinctive conditions of capitalism, the relationship between an exploiting class of capitalists and a propertyless class of wage laborers, has

been accompanied by a historically *unique* drive to revolutionize productive forces. Throughout history, there has certainly been a long-term improvement of productive forces; but, as Marx tells us, all societies before capitalism had a built-in tendency to keep production as it was. Only capitalism has broken that universal rule and created new pressures constantly to enhance labor productivity by technical means.

The pressure to accumulate and to revolutionize the instruments of production is rooted in the capitalist mode of exploitation, the means by which capital extracts labor from workers. Capitalists are dependent on the market both to acquire the means of producing goods or services and to sell those goods or services. Even the labor-power of workers is a commodity, which capitalists buy for a fixed period of time in exchange for a wage. Capital then puts that labor-power to work and seeks to obtain the maximum output in limited time at minimum cost. So capital is constantly seeking new techniques, new instruments, new modes of organization and control, to increase the productivity of labor, in order to meet competition in the market. To produce "competitively" for the market inevitably means constant accumulation and profit-maximization. It also means constant change: new technologies, new commodities, new services, new needs, new forms of organization, and new social arrangements.

Marx emphasizes the historical uniqueness of a system in which the provision of virtually all human needs and wants is organized in this unprecedented way, where everything, even the most basic requirements like food and shelter, is produced for a profit. The effects of such a system on human life and social relations, not to mention nature itself, are bound to be drastic and far-reaching. In a few short passages, Marx dramatically conveys the consequences of a system in which everything—not only things, but nature and human activity—becomes a commodity to buy and sell on the market, and where human relations are reduced to "callous cash payment."

On the eve of the twenty-first century, when the commodification of life has gone so far that it is hard to imagine how it could go any further, when everything from food to culture to health care is distorted by market imperatives, we know all too well what this means. We know how destructive these market imperatives can be to the social fabric and the natural environ-

ment. We know their costs in poverty, in crime, in environmental pollution, in the waste of natural resources and human lives. Yet in Marx's day the process of commodification was far less advanced, and his prescience is truly remarkable.

Remarkable, too, is his insight into the effects of this system on labor. The exploitation of workers, their compulsion to work not only to sustain themselves and their families but to create maximum profits for their employers, is the essence of the story. But there is also the question of what happens to human labor when it is transformed from the exercise of human creativity into just a profit-making activity, or a commodity, whose value lies not in the satisfaction it gives to the worker or in its benefits to the community but in the gains it can realize in the market and in its contribution to capital accumulation.

It should be obvious that work is bound to be organized, and experienced, in different ways according to its purpose. The need to extract maximum output at minimum cost imposes very particular requirements, which inevitably have significant effects on human well-being. Marx describes the degradation of work when it is organized for the sole purpose of maximizing profit for the capitalist owners of the means of production. The effects are most visible where workers become mere "appendages" of the machine in an assembly line, but similar effects occur wherever the maximization of profit is the main motivation in the organization of work. What ought to be a creative and fulfilling activity is more likely to become just meaningless drudgery.

Yet capitalism also has, from Marx's point of view, some positive effects. The bourgeoisie, he says, "has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals." It has "created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together." Its revolutionizing of productive forces has created an unprecedented capacity to produce the material conditions of well-being for everyone.

But here is another paradox: if capitalism has created unprecedented material wealth, the capacity to maximize material well-being for everyone remains *only* a capacity, not a reality. Capitalism, indeed, *prevents* it from becoming a reality. One of the most fundamental contradictions of the capitalist system is the huge disparity between its "colossal" productive capacity and the quality of life it delivers.

One obvious sense in which this is true is that capitalist development has been inseparable from imperialisms of various kinds, from traditional forms of colonial exploitation to the current burden of debt in the third world, or the exploitation of cheap third world labor by today's "transnational" companies. The contradiction between capitalism's productive capacity and the quality of life is manifest today in the growing polarization between an opulent North and an indigent South. But the same contradiction is evident within the advanced capitalist economies themselves.

In a system where all production is for profit, the allocation of resources and labor will, of course, be determined not by their contribution to the well-being of as many people as possible but by their contribution to profitability. The society's productive capacities are much more likely to be devoted to producing, say, new model cars every year for those who can afford them, or computers designed to be obsolete as soon as they hit the market, than to providing decent affordable housing for all. So Marx would not be surprised that a society like the U.S., with the capacity to feed, clothe, house, educate, and provide health care for all its members, nevertheless has widespread poverty, homelessness, malnutrition, health care costs that many people cannot afford, and a system of education that leaves many functionally illiterate. Nor is it surprising that, in a society with such built-in inequities, there are deep social divisions, in which, for example, class exploitation and racism reinforce one another.

Capitalism and Socialism

Still, capitalism has produced the *capacity* to maximize material well-being, and in that sense, it has laid a foundation for a different kind of society. Socialism would build on the productive forces created by capitalism, but it would eliminate the pressures for profit-maximization and capital accumulation which cause the disparity between productive capacity and the quality of life.

Capitalism has also, the *Manifesto* argues, created a social force, a class, with the capacity to overthrow capitalism and put socialism in its place. By giving birth to a mass proletariat, Marx maintains, capitalism has brought into being its own gravediggers. But many commentators, even on the socialist left, would now probably regard this as the most questionable assumption

in the whole pamphlet. It is certainly true that capitalism has created a mass working class, both "blue collar" and "white collar" workers of various kinds who have in common their exploitation by capital. These workers are strategically situated at the heart of a system which depends on their labor, and that strategic location gives them a social power that could, as no other social force can, transform capitalism into socialism. It is also true that working class movements have fought many historic battles, won many important victories, and acted as a revolutionary force in many parts of the world. But, while Western Europe and North America have seen many episodes of mass working class radicalism, and some Western European countries may even have been brought to the brink of revolution, the working class has never yet brought about socialism in the advanced capitalist countries that seemed to Marx and Engels the most likely candidates. The result has been that even many socialists have become skeptical about the prospects for a new society.

We cannot assume that Marx's own optimism about the political development of the working class was quite as unalloyed as it seems in the *Manifesto*. He certainly knew that there were forces dividing as well as uniting the working class, and that much organizational and educational effort would be required to turn the working class into an effective political force. But it was clearly not his intention in a political manifesto to dwell on the obstacles, and the picture is obviously a great deal more complicated than the one he paints in his rousing call to arms.

The prediction that the organization of production in industrial capitalism, together with improvements in transportation and communication, would increasingly unite the working class into a cohesive force has come true in some respects. And no one can deny that working class struggles have achieved major gains which have improved the quality of life for everyone, gains we now take for granted such as a shorter working day and unemployment insurance. But unifying tendencies have also been counteracted, and for the time being overcome, by other forces that *fragment* the working class. Workers are divided by race, gender, and many other "identities," not to mention by the resurgent nationalisms which have defied Marx's conviction that the global economy created by capitalism would be followed by a new kind of internationalism.

These are not the only factors that divide the working class. Paradoxically, it tends to be fragmented by the very organization of production in capitalism. Capitalist production tends to focus the grievances and struggles of workers on their individual workplaces and against their own particular employers. When Marx suggests that “every class struggle is a political struggle,” he undoubtedly means that every class struggle, even in the workplace, and even over purely “economic” issues, is about class power and resistance to domination. But what this proposition does not say is that capitalism has created a distinctive kind of relation between the “economic” and the “political.” Capitalism has in a sense *separated* “economic” from political struggles, simply because the “economy” now has a life, and a power structure, of its own. The capitalist market has its own “economic” imperatives; the capitalist workplace has its own hierarchies, authorities, and rules; and the dominant class, unlike any class before it, has economic powers that do not depend directly on political power, even though it ultimately depends on the state to sustain the system of property on which its class power rests. So workers may be, and often have been, very militant in their industrial conflicts with capital without their class struggles spilling over into the political sphere.

The *Manifesto*’s optimism about the coming of socialism has, of course, been contradicted by another, truly spectacular, development: the end, in the 1980s and 1990s, of the system brought into being in the decades following the Russian Revolution of 1917. It is true that the revolution was far from the ideal test of Marx’s predictions. Russia was not an advanced industrial capitalism with a mass proletariat, the kind of society that Marx regarded as the right foundation for a socialist transformation. At the time of the revolution, there were certainly pockets of fairly advanced industry and, at least in the principal large cities, a very militant industrial proletariat. At the same time, Russia remained a largely peasant country, and many industrial workers themselves remained rooted in their peasant villages. In these and other ways, the Russian heartland itself would not have met Marx’s criteria for an advanced capitalist society—even by the standards of his mid-nineteenth century model, Britain; and if we add what might be called the “third world” regions of the czarist empire, this massive country

could hardly be said to meet Marx's prerequisites for a transition from capitalism to socialism.

At any rate, what eventually emerged in the Soviet Union was very different from the democratic society Marx envisaged when he talked about a socialism based on the "free association of direct producers." In fact, it should be emphasized that much of what has gone under the name of Communism in the twentieth century has had little to do with what the *Communist Manifesto* meant by the term or with the Communist movement to which Marx and Engels belonged. Even when Marx began to expect some kind of revolution in Russia, he always assumed that a truly *socialist* revolution would have to take place in a capitalist country with more advanced productive forces and a more developed proletariat, a country like Britain or the U.S. Only in tandem with a proletarian revolution in such an advanced capitalist country could a Russian Revolution become a transition to socialism. He seems to have assumed that only well developed productive forces and a mature mass proletariat could direct production toward the fulfillment of the whole community's needs—not for capitalist profit nor for the benefit of any other kind of ruling class, and not controlled from above by an authoritarian state but under the democratic control of the "freely associated direct producers," the workers themselves.

Capitalism had taken centuries to create a mass proletariat and to accomplish even the development of productive forces available in Marx's day. It had done these things with many oppressions, atrocities, and tragedies along the way. Marx never sought, nor has anyone else yet found, a democratic, socialist way of achieving that kind of development. He regarded this contradictory achievement not as the task of socialism but as its precondition.

This is not to deny that the Soviet Union did, in fact, succeed in developing productive forces far beyond what Marx could have foreseen, and with exceptional speed. The point is rather that it would have been very difficult to accomplish such intensive development by means of the democratic organization of production that for Marx was the essence of socialism. To attain that level of development required a process of accumulation which capitalism had accomplished, over several centuries, not by democratic means but by expropriating small proprietors and by exploiting workers to the limits of the r

physical endurance. It would not have been easy to devise a democratic means of achieving comparable results. A truly democratic socialist party, a party very different from the oppressive Stalinist regime, would certainly have avoided the monstrosities of Stalinism. But even the most democratic socialist party, if obliged to administer the process of accumulation and to enforce the kind of intensive labor this required, would have found itself in a very difficult and contradictory relationship with the working class it was supposed to represent.

No one would claim that Marx foresaw what might happen if a revolution in the name of communism did take place in a less developed country. It is even less likely that he could have foreseen the crimes perpetrated by Stalinism in the name of communism. But we should not underestimate the significance of his assumption that a socialist revolution would be most likely to succeed in the context of a more advanced capitalism. In that sense, it could be argued that the ultimate failure of the Russian Revolution, which occurred in the absence of those preconditions, fulfilled his predictions all too well. Yet if that failure has not by itself proved him wrong, the fact remains that, on the eve of the twenty-first century, socialists do not seem to have very much to be optimistic about.

The Manifesto and the Future

But the story is not finished. Nor have we reached the end of what the *Manifesto* has to teach us. There is still much to be learned even from its predictions. Marx has been proved uncannily right about many things, but nowhere has he been vindicated more completely than in his account of capitalist expansion. It is true that he underestimated the durability of capitalism and how long it could keep on expanding. But for all today's fashionable talk about "globalization," it would be hard to find a more effective description of what is happening today than what he wrote 150 years ago. Capitalism has indeed "battered down all Chinese walls" (including the "walls" of "communist" China), creating a global market and compelling "all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production." Capitalism has indeed created a world "after its own image."

In Marx's day, that process of "globalization" was still in its early stages. But today capitalist imperatives of accumulation

and competition really do reach into every corner of the world. Many people have argued that this is the final and irreversible triumph of capitalism. Yet in the face of events like the recent financial crisis in Southeast Asia, in economies hailed only yesterday as "Asian tigers," these triumphalist pronouncements have a somewhat hollow ring. Mainstream economists who usually like to use more benign terms like "business cycles," or "slumps," or "recessions" are uttering the word "crisis" with increasing frequency, and some more pessimistic commentators have gone beyond Marxists in their talk of "collapse." Against that background, the *Manifesto's* portrayal of capitalist expansion as a deeply contradictory process is rather more convincing than capitalist triumphalism:

a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and exchange is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.... It is enough to mention the commercial crises that by their periodical return put the existence of the entire bourgeois society on trial.... In these crises, there breaks out an epidemic that, in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity—the epidemic of over-production....

And, the *Manifesto* continues, the very methods on which capital relies to overcome these crises are the very methods by which it paves the way for more destructive crises and reduces the means of correcting and preventing them.

Capitalism, for instance, used to escape its internal crises by moving outward, into new markets and colonies. Today, having become a virtually universal system, it no longer has the same scope for external expansion which used to save it from its internal contradictions, so it has become subject to these contradictions in historically new ways. Capital today no longer seems able to sustain maximum profitability by means of commensurate economic growth. It is now relying more and more on simply *redistributing* wealth in favor of the rich, and on increasing inequalities, within and between national economies, with the help of the "neoliberal" state. In advanced capitalist countries, the most visible signs of that redistribution are a growing polarization between rich and poor, and the attack on the welfare state. So it is not just in the occasional dramatic crisis but in its "normal" and long-term development that capitalism has been vindicating Marx's predictions about its contradictory expansion.

These developments may after all prove Marx right about the effects of capitalism on the political development of the working class. The conditions that led him to his conclusions about the formation of working class consciousness and organization are still present; and the working class, strategically situated at the heart of capitalism, is still the only social force with the capacity to transform it. At the same time, capitalism is evolving in ways that may overcome the factors that have up to now worked against those processes of class formation.

As neoliberal states step up their attacks on social provision and adopt austerity measures to enhance "flexibility," the complicity between the state and "globalized" capital is becoming increasingly transparent. As a result, it may turn out that economic class struggles will indeed move onto the political plane, and that the working class will indeed be unified in new and unprecedented ways. In many countries, labor movements which have been dormant for some time show signs of reawakening. And we have certainly seen many dramatic examples recently of people joining together in the streets—from Canada to Mexico to France to South Korea—to protest "neoliberalism," "globalization," and all the policies that capitalist states today are implementing to maintain the "competitiveness" of their own national economies.

Contrary to much conventional wisdom today, "globalization" has made the state not less but more important to capital. Capital needs the state to maintain the conditions of accumulation and "competitiveness" in various ways, including direct subsidies at tax-payers' expense; to preserve labor discipline and social order in the face of austerity and "flexibility"; to enhance the mobility of capital while blocking the mobility of labor; to administer huge rescue operations for capitalist economies in crisis (yesterday Mexico, today the "Asian tigers")—operations often organized by international agencies but always paid for by national taxes and enforced by national governments. Even the imperialism of the major capitalist states requires the collaboration of subordinate states to act as transmission belts and agents of enforcement. "Neoliberalism" is not just a withdrawal of the state from social provision. It is a set of active policies, a new form of state intervention designed to enhance capitalist profitability in an integrated global market.

Capital's need for the state makes the state again an important and concentrated focus for class struggle. And the fact that the state is visibly implicated in class exploitation has consequences for class organization and consciousness. It may help to overcome the fragmentation of the working class and create a new unity against a common enemy. It may also help to turn class struggle into political struggle.

Whatever happens, the *Manifesto's* critique of capitalism and its vision of socialism will remain very much alive as long as capitalism exists. Parts of the *Manifesto's* political program have been implemented within capitalist society. Child labor in factories has generally been abolished in advanced capitalist countries, though it still exists on a large scale, for instance, in U.S. agriculture, and it is certainly widespread in third world economies—often exploited by “transnationals” based in Western capitalist countries. Progressive income tax is the general rule—though it is under growing attack from the right. In advanced capitalist countries there is free education for all, up to a point—though even this is being eroded now in various ways. Some means of communication and transportation, as well as other enterprises, are, or have been, in public ownership in capitalist societies, and some capitalist countries have state banks.

All this has happened without destroying the capitalist system. In fact, capitalism has been saved from its own destructive tendencies by the public services, the social provision, and the “safety nets” that working class movements in the past have struggled long and hard to achieve.

The kind of public ownership we know today has, to be sure, little in common with enterprises run under direct democratic control, by “free associations of direct producers.” For that matter, even public enterprises themselves—not just the means of communication and transportation, but health care and education—can be, and in capitalism are, subjected to the logic of the capitalist market. The objective of today's neoliberal politics is to “privatize” anything that could conceivably be run for capitalist profit—from prisons, to postal services, to old-age pensions. But it has also set out to ensure that every public enterprise, every social service, that cannot be profitably “privatized” will still be subject to market imperatives.

Here, then, is another contradiction: capitalism today, in its efforts to remain “competitive,” is destroying the very serv-

ices and institutions that have often rescued it from self-destruction. But even if neoliberalism does not completely succeed in its wrecking operations, the capitalist system will always restrict any efforts to limit the damage it does to people and nature. It begins to look as if the logic of the system has now reached the point where the destructive force of capitalism is outstripping its capacity to repair or compensate for the harm it inflicts.

Capitalism will also always restrict the scope of democracy. It can never permit a truly democratic society where there are no oppressed and oppressing classes; where “accumulated labor is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the laborer” and not just to enhance capitalist profit; where reproduction, child care, and relations between the sexes are not deformed by capitalist imperatives; where no nation oppresses another; where culture is free of distortion by the market; and so on. As long as we live under capitalism, we will live in a society where the needs and actions of undemocratic and unaccountable capitalist enterprises, both by the direct exercise of class power and through the “market,” shape our social and natural environment and determine the conditions of life for every living being that comes within their global orbit.

Now more than ever it should be obvious, as it was to Marx and Engels, that a society driven by the imperatives of capital accumulation has to give way to a more humane and democratic social order. For such a transformation to take place, the main moving force will still have to be class struggle.