

From the archives: Trotsky on Ninety Years of the Communist Manifesto, (Oct. 1937)

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It is hard to believe that the centennial of the **Manifesto of the Communist Party** is only ten years away! This pamphlet, displaying greater genius than any other in world literature, astounds us even today by its freshness. Its most important sections appear to have been written yesterday. Assuredly, the young authors (Marx was twenty-nine, Engels twenty-seven) were able to look further into the future than anyone before them, and perhaps than anyone since them.

As early as their joint preface to the edition of 1872, Marx and Engels declared that despite the fact that certain secondary passages in the **Manifesto** were antiquated, they felt that they no longer had any right to alter the original text inasmuch as the **Manifesto** had already become a historical document, during the intervening period of twenty-five years. Sixty-five additional years have elapsed since that time. Isolated passages in the **Manifesto** have receded still further into the past. We shall try to establish succinctly in this

preface both those ideas in the **Manifesto** which retain their full force today and those which require important alteration or amplification.

1. The materialist conception of history, discovered by Marx only a short while before and applied with consummate skill in the **Manifesto**, has completely withstood the test of events and the blows of hostile criticism. It constitutes today one of the most precious instruments of human thought. All other interpretations of the historical process have lost all scientific meaning. We can state with certainty that it is impossible in our time to be not only a revolutionary militant but even a literate observer in politics without assimilating the materialist interpretation of history.
2. The first chapter of the **Manifesto** opens with the following words: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." This postulate, the most important conclusion drawn from the materialist interpretation of history, immediately became an issue in the class struggle. Especially venomous attacks were directed by reactionary hypocrites, liberal doctrinaires, and idealistic democrats against the theory which substituted the struggle of material interests for "common welfare," "national unity," and "eternal moral truths" as the driving force of history. They were later joined by recruits from the ranks of the labor movement itself, by the so-called revisionists, i.e., the proponents of reviewing ("revising") Marxism in the spirit of class collaboration and class conciliation. Finally, in our own time, the same path has been followed in practice by the contemptible epigones of the Communist International (the "Stalinists"): the policy of the so-called People's Front flows wholly from the denial of the laws of the class struggle. Meanwhile, it is precisely the epoch of

imperialism, bringing all social contradictions to the point of highest tension, which gives to the **Communist Manifesto** its supreme theoretical triumph.

3. The anatomy of capitalism, as a specific stage in the economic development of society, was given by Marx in its finished form in **Capital** (1867). But even in the **Communist Manifesto** the main lines of the future analysis are firmly sketched: the payment for labor power as equivalent to the cost of its reproduction; the appropriation of surplus value by the capitalists; competition as the basic law of social relations; the ruination of intermediate classes, i.e., the urban petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry; the concentration of wealth in the hands of an ever-diminishing number of property owners, at the one pole, and the numerical growth of the proletariat, at the other; the preparation of the material and political preconditions for the socialist regime.
4. The proposition in the **Manifesto** concerning the tendency of capitalism to lower the living standards of the workers, and even to transform them into paupers, had been subjected to a heavy barrage. Parsons, professors, ministers, journalists, Social Democratic theoreticians, and trade union leaders came to the front against the so-called "theory of impoverishment." They invariably discovered signs of growing prosperity among the toilers, palming off the labor aristocracy as the proletariat, or taking a fleeting tendency as permanent. Meanwhile, even the development of the mightiest capitalism in the world, namely, US capitalism, has transformed millions of workers into paupers who are maintained at the expense of federal, municipal, or private charity.
5. As against the **Manifesto**, which depicted commercial and industrial crises as a series of ever more extensive catastrophes, the revisionists vowed that the national and international development of trusts would assure

control over the market, and lead gradually to the abolition of crises. The close of the last century and the beginning of the present one were in reality marked by a development of capitalism so tempestuous as to make crises seem only "accidental" stoppages. But this epoch has gone beyond return. In the last analysis, truth proved to be on Marx's side in this question as well.

6. "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." This succinct formula, which the leaders of the Social Democracy looked upon as a journalistic paradox, contains in fact the only scientific theory of the state. The democracy fashioned by the bourgeoisie is not, as both Bernstein and Kautsky thought, an empty sack which one can undisturbedly fill with any kind of class content. Bourgeois democracy can serve only the bourgeoisie. A government of the "People's Front," whether headed by Blum or Chautemps, Caballero or Negrin, is only "a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." Whenever this "committee" manages affairs poorly, the bourgeoisie dismisses it with a boot.
7. "Every class struggle is a political struggle." "The organization of the proletariat as a class [is] consequently its organization into a political party." Trade unionists, on the one hand, and anarchosyndicalists, on the other, have long shied away – and even now try to shy away – from the understanding of these historical laws. "Pure" trade unionism has now been dealt a crushing blow in its chief refuge: the United States. Anarchosyndicalism has suffered an irreparable defeat in its last stronghold – Spain. Here too the **Manifesto** proved correct.
8. The proletariat cannot conquer power within the legal framework established by the bourgeoisie. "Communists openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social

conditions.” Reformism sought to explain this postulate of the **Manifesto** on the grounds of the immaturity of the movement at that time, and the inadequate development of democracy. The fate of Italian, German, and a great number of other “democracies” proves that “immaturity” is the distinguishing trait of the ideas of the reformists themselves.

9. For the socialist transformation of society, the working class must concentrate in its hands such power as can smash each and every political obstacle barring the road to the new system. “The proletariat organized as the ruling class” – this is the dictatorship. At the same time it is the only true proletarian democracy. Its scope and depth depend upon concrete historical conditions. The greater the number of states that take the path of the socialist revolution, the freer and more flexible forms will the dictatorship assume, the broader and more deepgoing will be workers’ democracy.
10. The international development of capitalism has predetermined the international character of the proletarian revolution. “United action, of the leading civilized countries at least, is one of the first conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat.” The subsequent development of capitalism has so closely knit all sections of our planet, both “civilized” and “uncivilized,” that the problem of the socialist revolution has completely and decisively assumed a world character. The Soviet bureaucracy attempted to liquidate the **Manifesto** with respect to this fundamental question. The Bonapartist degeneration of the Soviet state is an overwhelming illustration of the falseness of the theory of socialism in one country.
11. “When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character.” In other words: the state withers away.

Society remains, freed from the straitjacket. This is nothing else but socialism. The converse theorem: the monstrous growth of state coercion in the USSR is eloquent testimony that society is moving away from socialism.

12. "The workingmen have no fatherland." These words of the **Manifesto** have more than once been evaluated by philistines as an agitational quip. As a matter of fact they provided the proletariat with the sole conceivable directive in the question of the capitalist "fatherland." The violation of this directive by the Second International brought about not only four years of devastation in Europe, but the present stagnation of world culture. In view of the impending new war, for which the betrayal of the Third International has paved the way, the **Manifesto** remains even now the most reliable counselor on the question of the capitalist "fatherland."

Thus, we see that the joint and rather brief production of two Young authors continues to give irreplaceable directives upon the most important and burning questions of the struggle for emancipation. What other book could even distantly be compared with the **Communist Manifesto**? But this does not imply that after ninety years of unprecedented development of productive forces and vast social struggles, the **Manifesto** needs neither corrections nor additions. Revolutionary thought has nothing in common with idol-worship. Programs and prognoses are tested and corrected in the light of experience, which is the supreme criterion of human reason. The **Manifesto**, too, requires corrections and additions. However, as is evidenced by historical experience itself, these corrections and additions can be successfully made only by proceeding in accord with the method lodged in the foundation of the **Manifesto** itself. We shall try to indicate this in several most important

instances.

1. Marx taught that no social system departs from the arena of history before exhausting its creative potentialities. The **Manifesto** excoriates capitalism for retarding the development of the productive forces. During that period, however, as well as in the following decades, this retardation was only relative in nature. Had it been possible in the second half of the nineteenth century to organize economy on socialist beginnings, its tempos of growth would have been immeasurably greater. But this theoretically irrefutable postulate does not invalidate the fact that the productive forces kept expanding on a world scale right up to the world war. Only in the last twenty years, despite the most modern conquests of science and technology, has the epoch of out-and-out stagnation and even decline of world economy begun. Mankind is beginning to expend its accumulated capital, while the next war threatens to destroy the very foundations of civilization for many years to come. The authors of the **Manifesto** thought that capitalism would be scrapped long prior to the time when from a relatively reactionary regime it would turn into an absolutely reactionary regime. This transformation took final shape only before the eyes of the present generation, and changed our epoch into the epoch of wars, revolutions, and fascism.
2. The error of Marx and Engels in regard to the historical dates flowed, on the one hand, from an underestimation of future possibilities latent in capitalism, and, on the other, an overestimation of the revolutionary maturity of the proletariat. The revolution of 1848 did not turn into a socialist revolution as the **Manifesto** had calculated, but opened up to Germany the possibility of a vast future capitalist ascension. The Paris Commune proved that the proletariat, without having a tempered revolutionary party at its head, cannot wrest power from

the bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, the prolonged period of capitalist prosperity that ensued brought about not the education of the revolutionary vanguard, but rather the bourgeois degeneration of the labor aristocracy, which became in turn the chief brake on the proletarian revolution. In the nature of things, the authors of the **Manifesto** could not possibly have foreseen this “dialectic.”

3. For the **Manifesto**, capitalism was – the kingdom of free competition. While referring to the growing concentration of capital, the **Manifesto** did not draw the necessary conclusion in regard to monopoly, which has become the dominant capitalist form in our epoch and the most important precondition for socialist economy. Only afterwards, in *Capital*, did Marx establish the tendency toward the transformation of free competition into monopoly. It was Lenin who gave a scientific characterization of monopoly capitalism in his *Imperialism*.
4. Basing themselves on the example of “industrial revolution” in England, the authors of the **Manifesto** pictured far too unilaterally the process of liquidation of the intermediate classes, as a wholesale proletarianization of crafts, petty trades, and peasantry. In point of fact, the elemental forces of competition have far from completed this simultaneously progressive and barbarous work. Capitalism has ruined the petty bourgeoisie at a much faster rate than it has proletarianized it. Furthermore, the bourgeois state has long directed its conscious policy toward the artificial maintenance of petty-bourgeois strata. At the opposite pole, the growth of technology and the rationalization of largescale industry engenders chronic unemployment and obstructs the proletarianization of the petty bourgeoisie. Concurrently, the development of capitalism has accelerated in the extreme the growth of legions of technicians, administrators, commercial employees, in

short, the so-called "new middle class." In consequence, the intermediate classes, to whose disappearance the **Manifesto** so categorically refers, comprise even in a country as highly industrialized as Germany about half of the population. However, the artificial preservation of antiquated petty-bourgeois strata in no way mitigates the social contradictions, but, on the contrary, invests them with a special malignancy, and together with the permanent army of the unemployed constitutes the most malevolent expression of the decay of capitalism.

5. Calculated for a revolutionary epoch the **Manifesto** contains (end of Chapter II) ten demands, corresponding to the period of direct transition from capitalism to socialism. In their preface of 1872, Marx and Engels declared these demands to be in part antiquated, and, in any case, only of secondary importance. The reformists seized upon this evaluation to interpret it in the sense that transitional revolutionary demands had forever ceded their place to the Social Democratic "minimum program," which, as is well known, does not transcend the limits of bourgeois democracy. As a matter of fact, the authors of the **Manifesto** indicated quite precisely the main correction of their transitional program, namely, "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the readymade state machinery and wield it for its own purposes." In other words, the correction was directed against the fetishism of bourgeois democracy. Marx later counterposed to the capitalist state, the state of the type of the Commune. This "type" subsequently assumed the much more graphic shape of soviets. There cannot be a revolutionary program today without soviets and without workers' control. As for the rest, the ten demands of the **Manifesto**, which appeared "archaic" in an epoch of peaceful parliamentary activity, have today regained completely their true significance. The Social Democratic "minimum program," on the other hand, has become hopelessly antiquated.

6. Basing its expectation that "the German bourgeois revolution ... will be but a prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution," the **Manifesto** cites the much more advanced conditions of European civilization as compared with what existed in England in the seventeenth century and in France in the eighteenth century, and the far greater development of the proletariat. The error in this prognosis was not only in the date. The revolution of 1848 revealed within a few months that precisely under more advanced conditions, none of the bourgeois classes is capable of bringing the revolution to its termination: the big and middle bourgeoisie is far too closely linked with the landowners, and fettered by the fear of the masses; the petty bourgeoisie is far too divided and in its top leadership far too dependent on the big bourgeoisie. As evidenced by the entire subsequent course of development in Europe and Asia, the bourgeois revolution, taken by itself, can no more in general be consummated. A complete purge of feudal rubbish from society is conceivable only on the condition that the proletariat, freed from the influence of bourgeois parties, can take its stand at the head of the peasantry and establish its revolutionary dictatorship. By this token, the bourgeois revolution becomes interlaced with the first stage of the socialist revolution, subsequently to dissolve in the latter. The national revolution therewith becomes a link of the world revolution. The transformation of the economic foundation and of all social relations assumes a permanent (uninterrupted) character.

For revolutionary parties in backward countries of Asia, Latin America, and Africa, a clear understanding of the organic connection between the democratic revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat – and thereby, the international socialist revolution – is a life-and-death question.

7. While depicting how capitalism draws into its vortex backward and barbarous countries, the **Manifesto** contains no reference to the struggle of colonial and semicolonial countries for independence. To the extent that Marx and Engels considered the social revolution “in the leading civilized countries at least,” to be a matter of the next few years, the colonial question was resolved automatically for them, not in consequence of an independent movement of oppressed nationalities but in consequence of the victory of the proletariat in the metropolitan centers of capitalism. The questions of revolutionary strategy in colonial and semicolonial countries are therefore not touched upon at all by the **Manifesto**. Yet these questions demand an independent solution. For example, it is quite self-evident that while the “national fatherland” has become the most baneful historical brake in advanced capitalist countries, it still remains a relatively progressive factor in backward countries compelled to struggle for an independent existence.

“The Communists,” declares the **Manifesto**, “everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things.” The movement of the colored races against their imperialist oppressors is one of the most important and powerful movements against the existing order and therefore calls for the complete, unconditional, and unlimited support on the part of the proletariat of the white race. The credit for developing revolutionary strategy for oppressed nationalities belongs primarily to Lenin.

8. The most antiquated section of the **Manifesto** – with respect not to method but to material – is the criticism of “socialist” literature for the first part of the nineteenth century (Chapter III) and the definition of the position of the Communists in relation to various opposition parties (Chapter IV). The movements and

parties listed in the **Manifesto** were so drastically swept away either by the revolution of 1848 or by the ensuing counterrevolution that one must look up even their names in a historical dictionary. However, in this section, too, the **Manifesto** is perhaps closer to us now than it was to the previous generation. In the epoch of the flowering of the Second International, when Marxism seemed to exert an undivided sway, the ideas of pre-Marxist socialism could have been considered as having receded decisively into the past. Things are otherwise today. The decomposition of the Social Democracy and the Communist International at every step engenders monstrous ideological relapses. Senile thought seems to have become infantile. In search of all-saving formulas the prophets in the epoch of decline discover anew doctrines long since buried by scientific socialism.

As touches the question of opposition parties, it is in this domain that the elapsed decades have introduced the most deepgoing changes, not only in the sense that the old parties have long been brushed aside by new ones, but also in the sense that the very character of parties and their mutual relations have radically changed in the conditions of the imperialist epoch. The **Manifesto** must therefore be amplified with the most important documents of the first four congresses of the Communist International, the essential literature of Bolshevism, and the decisions of the conferences of the Fourth International.

We have already remarked above that according to Marx no social order departs from the scene without first exhausting the potentialities latent in it. However, even an antiquated social order does not cede its place to a new order without resistance. A change in social regimes presupposes the harshest form of the class struggle, i.e., revolution. If the proletariat, for one reason or another, proves incapable of overthrowing with an audacious blow the outlived bourgeois

order, then finance capital in the struggle to maintain its unstable rule can do nothing but turn the petty bourgeoisie ruined and demoralized by it into the pogrom army of fascism. The bourgeois degeneration of the Social Democracy and the fascist degeneration of the petty bourgeoisie are interlinked as cause and effect.

At the present time, the Third International far more wantonly than the Second performs in all countries the work of deceiving and demoralizing the toilers. By massacring the vanguard of the Spanish proletariat, the unbridled hirelings of Moscow not only pave the way for fascism but execute a goodly share of its labors. The protracted crisis of the international revolution, which is turning more and more into a crisis of human culture, is reducible in its essentials to the crisis of revolutionary leadership.

As the heir to the great tradition, of which the **Manifesto** of the Communist Party forms the most precious link, the Fourth International is educating new cadres for the solution of old tasks. Theory is generalized reality. In an honest attitude to revolutionary theory is expressed the impassioned urge to reconstruct the social reality. That in the southern part of the Dark Continent our cothinkers were the first to translate the **Manifesto** into the Afrikaans language is another graphic illustration of the fact that Marxist thought lives today only under the banner of the Fourth International. To it belongs the future. When the centennial of the **Communist Manifesto** is celebrated, the Fourth International will have become the decisive revolutionary force on our planet.

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