

The Communist Manifesto in the Light of Current Anthropology

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Presented by

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Abstract

For one hundred and fifty years, the Communist Manifest has inspired revolutionaries to commit their lives to the struggle for social justice. But neither Marx nor Engels saw the Manifesto as the last word in revolutionary thought, and the theory and practice of revolutionaries have undergone continual change and development since the Manifesto was written.

As the Manifesto continues to be read and re-read, it is important to bear in mind all that has happened since 1848. It is also important that the Manifesto be read in the light of whatever advances have been made in bourgeois social science since Marx and Engels wrote.

Both Marx and Engels were avid students of the anthropology of their time and made copious notes on such anthropological works as Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society*, which formed the basis for the classic work by Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.

Anthropology has made significant advances since the time of Marx and Engels: spectacular fossil discoveries, uncovering the remains of ancient civilizations, and more careful observations of non-Western peoples. Equally important are the theoretical advances which require us to shed our Eurocentrism and understand non-Western peoples in their own terms.

This paper will explore how such advances might contribute to a re-reading of the Manifesto to better prepare revolutionaries for the coming struggles of the twenty-first century.

The Communist Manifesto in the Light of Current Anthropology

The world has changed since the publication of the Communist Manifesto. Marxism has changed. And Anthropology has changed. Today, I would like to review how the changes in Anthropology might contribute to our evolving Marxism.

Both Marx and Engels were careful students of the anthropology of their time and made copious notes on such anthropological works as Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society*. These formed the basis for the classic work by Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.

Anthropology has made significant advances since the nineteenth century. There have been spectacular fossil discoveries. The remains of ancient civilizations have been uncovered. And the database of Anthropology has been improved through more careful observation and analysis of non-Western peoples.

The theoretical advances within Anthropology are equally important. The establishment of a professional anthropology in the twentieth century was marked by the development of cultural relativism. No longer were "primitive" cultures seen as stages through which Europeans had already passed, but rather, in the words of Roger Keesing (1981: 111-112) each culture came to be

“seen as a separate and unique experiment in human possibility—as if each were a differently colored, separate piece in a mosaic of human diversity, to be studied, and valued, in its own right.”

This amounted to a Copernican revolution in Anthropology (Clastres 1977). Rather than seeing Europe as the sun around which all “primitive” and “underdeveloped” societies revolve, we now see the West as but one facet in the mosaic of the human adventure on earth. This is not intended to denigrate the contributions of Western civilization but rather to place them in a broader perspective.

This changed way of thinking has far-reaching implications in every field of study, including Marxism. Let me review the development of Marxism in light of this Copernican revolution in Anthropology.

Marx was heir to the Enlightenment, and shared its Eurocentric view of progress. European capitalism represented the highest phase of human development and the socialist future would be built by the workers of the same nations that led the world into the capitalist present.

In the nineteenth century, this view seemed reasonable enough in light of the Paris Commune and the growing strength of the socialist movement in Western Europe.

In the twentieth century however, the vanguard of world revolution moved out of the imperialist nations and into the oppressed nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America—to

Cuba and the Philippines in 1898, China in 1900, Russia in 1905, Persia in 1906, Mexico in 1910, China again in 1911, and, once again, Russia in 1917.

These revolutions ushered in a new phase in the history of class struggle. This transformation occurred under the leadership of Lenin and the Communist International.

Lenin saw that the capitalist system had become a global system of imperialism in which capitalists exploit not only their own workers in Europe and North America, but also the peasants and workers of the oppressed nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Lenin changed the slogan of revolution from “Workers of the World, Unite!” to “Workers and Oppressed Peoples of the World, Unite.” Under Lenin’s leadership, an alliance was formed between workers and peasants, symbolized by the hammer and sickle. This alliance led to the historic socialist revolutions of the twentieth century in Russia, China, Cuba, and Vietnam.

Marxism-Leninism became a world movement and put down deep roots in cultures throughout the world. However, it remained essentially European in its outlook, in its view of the past, present, and future.

It is here that modern anthropology may make a contribution.

If we review the history of our species, we see that Western dominance has occupied but a fragment of humanity’s existence on earth. The few hundred years of European domination of the world has been very brief considering the five thousand years since civilization began in Asia and Africa and the five million years since our species separated from our apelike ancestors in Africa.

Our Eurocentrism should be further limited when we consider how it was that the West rose to world domination.

The conventional wisdom would have us believe that Europe advanced and became “developed” while Asia and the rest of the world stood still and remained “underdeveloped.” But as Marx clearly showed in his chapters on the primitive accumulation of capital, Europe financed its industrial revolution through the plunder of the non-Western world:

“The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.” (Marx 1867:751)

The emergence of capitalism, the creation of a world market, the development of modern science and technology, and the Industrial Revolution were European achievements, but they were built upon the earlier achievements in science, technology, and economics of

the Afro-Asiatic civilizations, and they were paid for by the plunder of the non-Western world. In this sense, they were achievements of our species, not narrowly European achievements. Europe may have gained the benefits, but the rest of the world paid the costs.

This process transformed not only Europe, but also Asia, Africa, and Latin America. As Europe advanced and industrialized, the rest of the world was de industrialized and pushed backwards in terms of social and economic development. This is the process which Andrew Gunder Frank (1967) has called “the development of underdevelopment.”

What we see in the non-Western world, then, are not precapitalist social formations, but social formations which have been transformed by capitalism. We can no longer see the non-Western world as “primitive,” “traditional,” or “precapitalist,” but rather as a particular form of capitalism: underdeveloping capitalism.

The conventional wisdom sees as a ladder on which the West occupies the highest rung. We see a teeter-totter on which the West has moved up by pushing the rest of the world down.

From this perspective, the so-called “advanced” capitalist nations of Europe and North America take on a different appearance, for the opposite of “underdeveloped” is not “advanced,” but “overdeveloped.”

Rather than a world divided into “advanced” and “backward” nations, we see what Bodner (1984:4-6) has called

“a worldwide combination of overdevelopment and underdevelopment that can be called “mal-development.” The symptoms of overdevelopment—dependence of complex bureaucratic technologies and institutions, overconsumption, industrial pollution, and interpersonal alienation—are most apparent in countries like our own. The outward signs of underdevelopment are most apparent in poor countries. However, both aspects of mal-development can be found in most nations of the world.”

There is more here than simply a shift in terminology. The term “advanced capitalist nation” implies that the Western nations, especially the United States, represent in some ways a norm towards which all other societies are tending or should be striving to achieve. This necessarily distorts our concept of socialism and our view of the future.

Marx never drafted a blueprint for socialism, and different people have different views about what socialism and communism may look like in the future. Nevertheless, there is a widespread view that socialism will be an affluent, industrial social order within which the predominant life style will not be that different from that of the upper middle class in Europe and North America. People will live in single family homes with appropriate kitchen appliances, electronic gadgetry, and one or more family cars. What will be new is that this life style will be accessible to everyone. Poverty will be eliminated, and everyone will enjoy a comfortable, affluent, bourgeois life style.

We may question whether this is desirable. We must question whether it is possible. The alienating culture of overconsumption pursued by perhaps one fifth of our species consumes probably four fifths of the earth's resources. As this culture spreads, it simply hastens our rush toward ecological catastrophe.

This raises profound questions for social policy and personal responsibility. The Communist Manifesto of one hundred and fifty years ago does not, and can not, provide us with concrete answers.

I am not sure that we need to totally abandon the concept of progress, but I think it is essential that we abandon Eurocentric views of progress. Western industrial capitalism is not the norm toward which all societies tend, and it cannot be the model for the socialist future.

Clearly, we need to re-think our concept of socialism, and take some lessons from the small scale societies of the Third World. The socialism of the twenty-first century will probably not be centralized and bureaucratic, but more community oriented, people centered, democratic, environmentally sensitive, and ecologically sustainable. In a word, it may not have much resemblance to what we have in the West.

In conclusion, let me quote from the Brazilian Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga when he was asked what people in the United States should do when confronted with the poverty of the Third World:

“The only legitimate response for a conscientious and Christian First World is to commit suicide. Let me explain. To commit suicide as the First World. The reason is very simple. The only reason there is a First World is that there is a Third World. With that I have said everything. Everything about dependence, cultural domination and economic exploitation. So only to the extent that the First World stops being first will we be able to stop being third. In the United States and in Europe, I think the church should be a kind of “fifth column” dedicated to undermining the present undemocratic capitalist system, to end imperialism and all forms of domination and cultural colonization.” (Casaldáliga 1987:15)

These Christian thoughts would surely have warmed the hearts of the authors of the Communist Manifesto.

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