

Socialism Is Dead! Long Live Socialism!

Reflections on the *Communist Manifesto*

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The relevance of the *Communist Manifesto* in the era of global capitalism was questioned following the collapse of the Soviet model of socialism and the failure of socialism elsewhere. The masterwork of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels foresaw the divergent paths which capitalism will take economies as well as the resulting inequality and poverty amid plenty. In the past 150 years, the correctness of the *Manifesto's* analysis of the capitalist system and its flaws, the periodic crises of overproduction, its tendencies towards concentration of capital and towards alienation of labor, its devaluation and destruction of every social nexus, and the revolutionary role of the proletariat class has been proven and refuted. Despite its imperfections, the *Manifesto* is the standard by which all alternative paradigms are measured. If the socialists and socialism can keep up, the *Manifesto* may yet liberate humankind from capitalism, perhaps within the next 150 years.

More than a 150 years ago, a handful of revolutionary intellectuals and worker-leaders met to defiantly proclaim a world revolution. That revolution, soon to be called the communist or socialist revolution, made an indelible mark in the history of humankind up to the present. It spawned or encouraged countless national or democratic struggles for liberation, from the tribes and nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America to the peoples of advanced European and North American countries. It forced a hitherto heartless capitalism to scramble for alternative visions. In the end, it left a certain legacy for the oppressed, the exploited and the powerless masses of the proletariat and the poor throughout the world.

This proclamation is contained in the *Communist Manifesto*, one of the most influential tracts of our times. This document, drafted by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848, summarized the most vital lessons of the international proletariat up to that moment when capitalism poised to launch itself as the world's most dominant social and economic system.

In the century and a half hence, we witnessed the first half of the *Manifesto's* predictions come to life – the unprecedented growth of capitalism throughout the world. It was accompanied by the most ruthless and systematic exploitation of the earth's human and material

resources, and the most resolute struggle of the rising international proletariat and nations of the exploited world.

The *Manifesto* spoke of the coming liberation of the proletariat and the advent of socialism and communism. It promised the specter of the downfall of the capitalist class and the abolition of private property and of classes in general.

How does the *Communist Manifesto* fare today? How relevant is it still?

Its contemporary meaning can be gleaned against the backdrop of two major social changes in recent history: one, the globalization of capital and market under capitalism, and, two, the failure of the Soviet model of socialism.

Pax Capital

The 20th century, more than anything else, is the century of capitalism, or more precisely, the century of the world capitalist order. From the global capitals to the remotest Antarctic outposts, the whole global economy now runs under the rules of the capitalist mode of production. It has spawned a vast, integrated, trillion-dollar global market, underwritten by interlocking and huge financial and investment capital, and supported by a global society guided by capitalist ethics and culture.

The finest achievements of the human race in the previous periods pale in comparison to the gargantuan accomplishments under the capitalist order: the moon landing and other space dramas, the unlocking of the secrets of life, the machine revolution, the global information network, and mass production of goods.

Of course, these would not have happened without the massive strides in science and technology. Capitalism also engendered a revolution in science, producing the relativity theories and quantum physics, two major theoretical constructs which led to nuclear and electronic technologies.

In turn, scientific advances impelled capitalist society to greater heights. These brought us to the brink of breathtaking, but probable, discoveries in the next century – the dawning of the space-faring humanity, the elixir of long life, almost limitless energy, planetary engineering, and global society.

Almost certainly, capitalism will fulfill its historical role of unleashing the massive forces of production towards the ultimate goal of satisfying the material needs of society. The *Manifesto* foresaw this even during the early rise of capitalism.

Mass Poverty Amidst Plenty

The *Manifesto*, on the other hand, pointed out the rise of misery is commensurate to the wealth of nations and of capitalists. This is borne out by contemporary statistical trends of widening economic and social gaps between the world's haves and the have-nots. Africa's Saharan tribes are perpetually subject to famine, illiteracy and pandemics. Asia's and Latin America's teeming urban and rural poor counts in billions. Despite their fabulous wealth, the earth's capitalist societies have not eradicated poverty nor broadened wealth.

Ironically, this happens at a time of capitalism's greatest wealth-creation period when hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of goods and financial instruments change hands daily in global markets. The global capitalist society is a society bound by its nexus of money, but in an unequal relationship – between a capitalist and a worker, between a wealthy capitalist nation and a poor underdeveloped one, a global finance capitalist and a local industrialist, etc. Society has never been so tiered and fragmented under the global unity of a single capitalist system.

Under the impact of the profit motive, everything is being put up for sale not only the goods produced in factories but even money itself. Values, intellectual thinking, religion, science, law and culture have all gone to the market.

Consequently, poverty under capitalism includes both material and spiritual/cultural deprivations. Workers in their millions feel the impact of every crisis of overproduction through lost jobs and benefits. Ironically, rising efficiency of the workplace results not in a heightened job security

but may even be the reason for retrenchment. The workers are getting it coming and going.

Indigenous peoples and their cultures all over the world face extinction under the impact of remorseless capitalist “progress.” Women and children suffer the fate of modern-day wage slaves, including the proliferation of a global sex trade on women and children. Vulnerable sectors everywhere are in danger of being trampled upon by untrammelled aggression of profit-oriented development and investment projects.

The very environment on a global scale is in crisis due to the unremitting (and conscienceless) capitalist drive to service an ever-hungry market. Witness the recent Borneo fires and the pervasive urban pollution.

The *Manifesto* correctly pointed out the incongruity between the efficiency and order of the capitalist factory and the anarchy of capitalist society, between the wealth it produces for the capitalist class and the relative misery of the producers, and the capitalist control of the levers of production and the creative labor of the workers.

Without any qualms, it asserted that these are the stuff a socialist revolution is made of. These contradictions run through the whole process of capitalist development, the resolution of which can only result in the further advance of the whole society.

The Future of Capitalism

There has been no comparable document to the *Manifesto* in trenchantly proclaiming the demise of capitalism as there has been no other document so condemned and derided by contemporary capitalists for, as they claimed, its “utter historical falsity.” They point to the global reach of capitalism today, the failure of the Soviet model of socialism, and the implicit acceptance of the market and other instruments of capitalism by China and others in the hitherto “socialist camp.”

In 1990, CEOs of transnational corporations gathered in Switzerland to proclaim the triumph of capitalism over the socialist challenge. They then declared that capitalism is the “wave of the future.”

However, by 1995, the same group expressed concern over the lack of a “human face” to capitalism. They warned of a possible breakdown of the system in the face of the worldwide environmental crisis, pervasive poverty, and increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots among countries and internally within countries in the capitalist world.

Today, as we stand on the threshold of the new millennium, capitalism is in retreat, beset by the financial and economic crisis of “emerging economies” and unable to go beyond the inescapable limits put by the global, yet finite, capitalist market. In this regard, the last revolution in information technology remains within the frame of a lease on life, not a guarantee for immortality.

The common mistake in assessing capitalism and hence in assessing the *Manifesto*'s analysis of capitalism lies in the collapsing of the time frame of its existence and the lifetime of inherent contradictions of the system. It even afflicted a major part of the socialist forces, with so many of its theorists and leaders of the past 150 years proclaiming, possibly for political consumption, the demise or the forthcoming demise of capitalism in their times.

There is no basis for wishing to shorten capitalism's life. Previous modes of production emerged, developed and stagnated for several centuries before they were overthrown. Even today, we see pockets and remnants of previous economic and social systems existing within the general system of capitalism.

It is to the credit of the *Manifesto* that it so boldly set forth the internal basis and process, as well as the certainty for the fall of capitalism. Yet, for all its “scientific” protestations, it did not and cannot know the zigs and the zags of this process. Its value lies precisely in its delineation of the general laws of development of capitalist society. It cannot be used rigidly to interpret short-term or even medium-term developments, except those pertaining to its own contemporary period.

The 150 years of capitalism since the *Manifesto* amply demonstrated the correctness of its analysis of the capitalist system and its flaws, the periodic crises of overproduction, its tendencies towards concentration of capital and towards alienation of labor, its devaluation and destruction of every social nexus, and the revolutionary role of the proletarian class.

However, this history also underlined the historical role of the productive forces in fostering the growth of capitalism and in keeping at bay its inherent tendency to stagnate and decay. Conversely, it also demonstrated capitalism's maintained ability to foster the development of productive forces and growth of society. Capitalism has not yet run its course.

In this context, the Soviet model (as well as all other socialist and socialist-oriented models) remains an experiment, and may even be termed as a premature or a unique project. While it had its positive sides, it certainly proved to be a dead-end one.

Capitalism achieved the most stupendous development of the productive forces, particularly in terms of harnessing nature's bounty through the use of the rapidly advancing science and technology. It is also apparent that it increasingly finds itself at odds with the newer technologies and discoveries, particularly in terms of social ethics and handling.

For example, nuclear technology revolutionized the energy sources and weaponry of nuclear-capable countries. However, it remains as much a sword of global self-destruction, particularly in this period of nuclear proliferation among lesser regional powers. Another example are the discoveries related to gene engineering, which, in the hands of profit-oriented venture-capitalists, endanger not only our food sources but endanger even humanity's future.

It is an irony that, while starting off the headlong rush towards newer and newer technologies and profiting from their being freely available, capitalism should now also start restricting the fruits of researches through the so-called intellectual property rights. The global internet provides an example of the new technology being increasingly subjected to this capitalist-oriented restriction.

What is slowly but surely happening now is that capitalism is changing from the progressive engine for developing the productive forces to a regressive force restricting their further progress. The continued growth of science and technology will certainly continue under the capitalist regime but capitalism will also increasingly lose the social capability or legitimacy to control them.

The global environmental crisis provides a graphic illustration of capitalism's social irresponsibility. In search of ever more profits, industrialists and venture-capitalists (and policy-makers attuned to them) neglected the necessary environmental safeguards for decades and the result is the current threat to the global ecology and environment.

Capitalism also brought about the birth and growth of the global human rights movement, which essentially seeks to achieve the benefits of democracy that capitalism promised the teeming masses it employed or dominated. Equality, fraternity and the right to happiness are being flung back at capitalism's face and demanded for realization. Women's rights advocates are struggling for the equal status of women in society. Minority groups demand the recognition of their own rights. Everybody but everybody, except maybe the capitalists, are on the march for their rights.

Belatedly, capitalists, while ferociously continuing their profit-motivated finance and capital games, have been forced to recognize their responsibilities to society. Not because of simple philanthropy or guilt-stricken conscience but because they realized that common ruin face them in the face of global environmental disaster or global anti-capitalist unrest.

Capitalism, as the *Manifesto* pointed out, is certain to be carried to its grave by its insoluble internal contradictions. While more dazzling achievements are still ahead, capitalism has started on its downward course. Globalization presents itself as its current challenge for continued growth. The limits of a global market may well produce its Waterloo.

Prospects for Socialism

Socialism, as the Russian people and the rest of the world have known it, is dead. As a practical experiment, the Soviet or the Leninist model of socialism proved to be a dead end. Ironically, it essentially demonstrated one of Marx's own fundamental thesis that is, that a society's superstructure (politics, culture, ethics, etc.) cannot go beyond the mode of production that forms its base, it must correspond to it.

What existed in the pre-Leninist Russia was the absence or insufficiency of the needed productive forces to support or consolidate a truly socialist

mode of production over time. The Soviet socialist revolution was a premature attempt, through sheer political will, particularly during the time of Stalin, to accelerate the growth of these productive forces and catch up with the basically political decision to go socialist.

At first, this succeeded, particularly in terms of the confiscation of land and capital from Russia's ruling classes, and the essentially centralized decision-making on allocation of the nation's resources. The growth of the Soviet economy was nothing short of spectacular with consistent double-digit percentage year-on-year.

However, this was achieved at great social costs. Agricultural lands were forcibly nationalized and collectivized, leading to the massive suppression, not only of the kulaks or rich peasants but even of the middle and lower peasants. They were all transformed into agricultural workers in the soviets. Heavy industries were given lop-sided priority in order to speedily form the self-reliant base of all the other industries in spite of the sacrifices this would entail in terms of the dearth and low quality of consumer goods provided by ageing and inadequate medium, light and consumer industries.

As demonstrated by its historical development, it became a command economy, entailing a huge governmental bureaucracy imposing its economic will on the day-to-day lives of the Russian people. However, the basically capitalist level of development of the productive forces cannot be denied. In the end, it only engendered state capitalism on a grand scale, with a new bureaucratic elite becoming increasingly alienated from the people. It also led to the concentration of absolute political power in the communist party. The tragedy of the Russian Leninist revolution lies in its inevitable transformation from a popular people's revolution to a fascist dictatorship.

The lack of economic and political democracy proved to be the well-spring of the people's discontent. There was the ever-present expectation of a better life under socialism among the masses of people. This included the expectation of the state's positive role in enhancing individual and local community initiatives, both in politics and economics. Time and again, the curtailment of individual and community initiative (in face of the real fear of fresh upsurges of capitalist ethics, values, and practices) led to widespread loss of labor and political initiative.

Stalin and succeeding leaders called for sacrifices for the motherland in the periods of the Second World War and the post-war Cold War. Coupled with a judicious dose of state-sponsored white terror, it effectively hid the real problem of social and economic stagnation for a long time.

Politically, the practice of human rights or, more precisely, their violations by the various Soviet regimes led to the loss of their legitimacy before the eyes of the Russian and other Eastern European peoples. Political support became brittle and, in the end, the ruling communist parties were swept away in dramatic people's uprisings throughout Russia and Eastern Europe in 1990-1991.

The *Communist Manifesto* and its insistence on the socialist revolution occurring first in the most advanced capitalist countries seems to be verified by the unsuccessful Soviet experiment. The latter very nearly brought the whole socialist vision down with it.

However, during the latter part of this decade, there occurred a relative resurgence of the socialist and Left agenda and forces not only in Russia and Eastern Europe but even in Western Europe and elsewhere in the world. It pointed to the fact that free-enterprise capitalism did not really provide a real alternative to the misery of the vast global masses. Neo-liberal laizzes faire gurus are on the retreat in the wake of the current Asian financial crisis.

The other problem however is that there exists no acceptable socialist alternative model either. The Chinese "market socialism" model has departed so far from hitherto the basic model of a socialist economy and society that it scarcely can be differentiated from the market capitalism it ritually criticizes. The only thing you can say about it is that it has so successfully integrated into the global capitalist framework that it is now being praised by Asian capitalists, the IMF, the US Federal Reserve Board, and the portfolio investors for being a cornerstone in stabilizing the Asian currency situation by refusing to devalue its own currency! It remains to be proven if its "road to socialism" in the present period represents a viable model to other progressive forces. It has certainly been attractive enough for Vietnam to follow. The hold-out members of the "socialist community" Cuba and North Korea currently are in the reluctant process of admitting their vulnerabilities in a capitalist world without a Soviet Union as aid-giver and trade partner.

Others in the erstwhile socialist community foresee a global socialist order on the ruins of a global capitalist order meaning, the completion of a possible process towards a single global nation-state in place of the present nation-states, a global capitalist crisis of overproduction, and a consequent global socialist struggle.

Between these two poles run a gamut of various analyses and propositions, the merits of which one can only hazard one's own opinions.

What it implies however is the current rekindling of the ferment towards new socialist theories and even theories beyond socialism all directed towards looking for alternatives to the reigning capitalism which increasingly is on the defensive on the questions of human rights, environment and humankind's future.

The *Manifesto* Lives On

Socialism, even after the Soviet fiasco, remains the standard by which all other alternative paradigms are measured. However, it is a socialism that needs to be refurbished, that needs to be attuned to contemporary realities, and that needs to be stripped of its historical baggages.

Socialism, then, has to go back to its roots and refresh itself from historical lessons learned through unjaundiced eyes and freed from quasi-religious dogma. It has to go beyond Mao, Stalin, and even Marx and Engels. It should embrace the new knowledge borne of 150 years of unremitting scientific discoveries, theoretical advances and field experiences.

The *Communist Manifesto* will have failed if it is simply treated as a measuring tool to determine the correctness of today's practice, rather than as a subject of affirmation by contemporary situation. Its historical place is secure for it portended the vast course of capitalist development and foretold the historical role of proletarian forces in the struggle against capitalism.

It is of value in the study of the long-term internal dynamics of capitalism, if one were to strip away its immediate messages to 19th century revolutionaries.

The battle for democracy which it envisaged as the political process for the emancipation of the proletariat remains an unfulfilled task. It cannot in advance determine the forms such a struggle will take and it is useless to use the *Manifesto* to argue for something so dependent on obtaining situations.

Its socialist message remains a long-term beacon to contemporary revolutionaries amidst the deepening capitalist crisis. Yet it remains the duty of contemporary socialists to chart the actual course of the worldwide socialist struggle on the basis of current situations. The *Manifesto* remains an inspirational call for the liberation of humankind from capitalism and for a society based, not on greed, but based on service to the development of one's self and of the community. ❁