

BOOKS & THE ARTS

Unchained Melody

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THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO: A Modern Edition. By Karl Marx and Frederick Engels.
With an introduction by Eric Hobsbawm. Verso. 87 pp. \$13.

The best story I've ever heard about *The Communist Manifesto* came from Hans Morgenthau, the great theorist of international relations who died in 1980. It was the early seventies at CUNY, and he was reminiscing about his childhood in Bavaria before World War I. Morgenthau's father, a doctor in a working-class neighborhood of Coburg, often took his son along on house calls. Many of his patients were dying of TB; a doctor could do nothing to save their lives, but might help them die with dignity. When his father asked about last requests, many workers said they wanted to have the *Manifesto* buried with them when they died. They implored the doctor to see that the priest didn't sneak in and plant the Bible on them instead.

This spring, the *Manifesto* is 150 years old. In that century and a half, apart from the Bible, it has become the most widely read book in the world. Eric Hobsbawm, in his splendid introduction to the handsome new Verso edition, gives a brief history of the book's reception. It can be summed up fast: Whenever there's trouble, anywhere in the world, the book becomes an item; when things quiet down, the book drops out of sight; when there's trouble again, the people who forgot remember. When fascist-type regimes seize power, it's always on the short list of books to burn. When people dream of resistance—even if they're not Communists, even if they distrust Communists—it provides music for their dreams. Get the beat of the beginning and the end. First line: "A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism." Last lines: "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!" In Rick's bar in *Casablanca*, you may or may not love France, but when the band breaks into "La Marseillaise," you've got to stand up and sing.

Yet literate people today, even people with left politics, are amazingly ignorant of



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what's actually in the book. For years, I've asked people what they think it consists of. The most popular answers are that it's (1) a utopian handbook on how to run a society with no money or property, or else (2) a Machiavellian handbook on how to create a Communist state and keep it in power. People who were Communists didn't seem to know the book any better than people who were not. (At first this amazed me; later I saw it was no accident. Classical Communist education was Talmudic, based on a study of commentaries, with an underlying suspicion of sacred primary texts. Among Orthodox Jews, the Bible is a sort of adult movie—a *yeshiva-bucher* is exposed to it only after years of Talmudic training, to insure that he will respond in orthodox ways. Similarly, a trainee at a party school would begin with Stalin, until 1956; then the great indoctrinator Lenin; then, with some hesitation, Engels; Marx came in only at the very end, and then only for those with security clearance.)

Now that security is gone. In just a few years, so many statues and magnifications of Marx have vanished from public squares; so many streets and parks named for him are going under other names today. What does it all mean? For some people, like our Sunday morning princes of the air, the implosion of the U.S.S.R. simply confirmed what they had believed all along, and released them from having to show respect. One of my old bosses at C.C.N.Y. said it concisely: "Nineteen eighty-nine proves that courses in Marxism are obsolete." But there are other ways to read history. What happened to Marx after 1917 was a disaster: A thinker needs beatification like a hole in the head. So we should welcome his descent from the pedestal as a fortunate fall. Maybe we can learn what Marx has to teach if we confront him at ground level, the level on which we ourselves are trying to stand.

So what does he offer? First, startling when you're not prepared for it, praise for capitalism so extravagant, it skirts the edge of awe. Very early in the *Manifesto*, he describes the processes of material construction that it perpetrates, and the emotions that go with them, especially the sense of being caught up in something magical and uncanny:

The bourgeoisie has created...more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways...clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations con-

jured out of the ground—what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive powers slumbered in the lap of social labour?

Or a page before, on an innate dynamism that is spiritual as well as material:

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.... Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, 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, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

Part 1, "Bourgeois and Proletarians," contains many passages like these, asserted in major chords with great dramatic flair. Somehow, many readers seem to miss them. But Marx's contemporaries didn't miss them, and some fellow radicals—Proudhon, Bakunin—saw his appreciation of capitalism as a betrayal of its victims. This charge is still heard today, and deserves serious response. Marx hates capitalism, but he also thinks it has brought immense real benefits, spiritual as well as material, and he wants the benefits spread around and enjoyed by everybody rather than monopolized by a small ruling class. This is very different from the totalitarian rage that typifies radicals who want to blow it all away. Sometimes, as with Proudhon, it is just modern times they hate; they dream of a golden-age peasant village where everyone was happily in his place (or in her place behind him). For other radicals, from the author of the *Book of Revelation* to the Unabomber, it goes over the edge into something like rage against reality, against human life itself. Apocalyptic rage offers immediate, sensational cheap thrills. Marx's perspective is far more complex and nuanced, and hard to sustain if you're not grown up.

Marx is not the first communist to admire capitalism for its creativity; that attitude can be found in some of the great utopian socialists of the generation before him, like Saint-Simon and Robert Owen. But Marx is the first to invent a prose style that can bring that perilous creativity to life. His style in the *Manifesto* is a kind of Expressionist lyricism. Every paragraph

breaks over us like a wave that leaves us shaking from the impact and wet with thought. This prose evokes breathless momentum, plunging ahead without guides or maps, breaking all boundaries, precarious piling and layering of things, ideas and experiences. Catalogues play a large role in Marx's style—as they do for his contemporaries Dickens and Whitman—but part of the *Manifesto*'s enchantment comes from our feeling that the lists are never exhausted, the catalogue is open to the present and the future, we are invited to pile on things, ideas and experiences of our own, to pile ourselves on if we can. But the items in the pile often seem to clash, and it sounds like the whole vast aggregation could crash. From paragraph to paragraph, Marx makes readers feel that we are riding the fastest and grandest nineteenth-century train through the roughest and most perilous nineteenth-century terrain, and though we have splendid light, we are pressing ahead where there is no track.

One feature of modern capitalism that Marx most admires is its global horizon and its cosmopolitan texture. Many people today talk about the global economy as if it had only recently come into being. The *Manifesto* should help us see the extent to which it has been there all along:

The need of a constantly expanding market chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are being daily destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer process indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe....

The cheap prices of its commodities are heavy artillery with which [the bourgeoisie] batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what is called civilization into their midst, i.e. to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

This global spread offers a spectacular display of history's ironies. These bourgeois are banal in their ambitions, yet their unremitting quest for profit forces on them the same insatiable drive-structure and infinite horizon as that of any of the great Romantic heroes—as Don Giovanni, as Childe Harold, as Goethe's Faust. They may think of only one thing, but their narrow focus leads to the broadest integrations; their shallow outlook wrecks the most profound transformations; their peaceful economic activity devastates every human society like a bomb, from the most primitive tribes to the mighty U.S.S.R. Marx was appalled at the human costs of capitalist development, but he always believed that the world horizon it created was a great achievement on which socialism must build. Remember, the grand appeal to Unite with which the *Manifesto* ends is addressed to "WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES."

A crucial global drama was the unfolding of the first-ever world culture. Marx, writing when mass media were just developing, called it "world literature." I think it is legitimate at the end of this century to update the idea into "world culture." The *Manifesto* shows how this culture will evolve spontaneously from the world market:

In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual [or spiritual—*geistige* can be translated either way] production. The intellectual [spiritual] creations of individual nations become common property...and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

This vision of world culture brings together several complex ideas. First, the expansion of human needs: the increasingly cosmopolitan world market at once shapes and expands everybody's desires. Marx doesn't elaborate on this in detail; but he wants us to imagine what it might mean in food, clothes, religion, music, love and in our most intimate fantasies as well as our public presentations. Next, the idea of culture as "common property" in the world market: Anything created by anyone anywhere is open and available to everyone everywhere. Entrepreneurs publish books, produce plays and concerts, display visual art and, in our century, create hardware and

software for movies, radio, TV and computers in order to make money. Nevertheless, in this as in other ways, history slips through the owners' fingers, so that poor people get to possess culture—an idea, a poetic image, a musical sound, Plato, Shakespeare, a Negro spiritual (Marx loved them)—even if they can't own it. Culture stuffs people's heads full of ideas. As a form of "common property," modern culture helps us to imagine how people all around the world could share all the world's resources someday.

It's a vision of culture rarely discussed, but it is one of the most expansive and hopeful things Marx ever wrote. In our century, the development of movies, television and video and computers has created a global visual language that brings the idea of world culture closer to home than ever, and the

Imagine what world culture might mean in food, clothes, music, love; in our intimate fantasies as well as our public presentations.

world beat comes through in the best of our music and books. That's the good news. The bad-news is how sour and bitter most left writing on culture has become. Sometimes it sounds as if culture were just one more Department of Exploitation and Oppression, containing nothing luminous or valuable in itself. At other times, it sounds as if people's minds were empty vessels with nothing inside except what Capital put there. Read, or try to read, a few articles on "hegemonic/counterhegemonic discourse." The way these guys write, it's as if the world has passed them by.

But if capitalism is a triumph in so many ways, exactly what's wrong with it? What's worth spending your life in opposition? In the twentieth century, Marxist movements around the world have concentrated on the argument, made most elaborately in *Capital*, that workers in bourgeois society had been or were being pauperized. Now, there were times and places where it was absurd to deny that claim; in other times and places (like the United States and Western Europe in the fifties and sixties, when I was young), it was pretty tenuous, and Marxist economists went through strange dialectical twists to make the numbers come out. But the problem with that discussion was that it converted questions of human experience into questions of numbers: It led Marxism to think and talk exactly like capitalism! The *Manifesto* occasionally makes some version of this claim. But it offers what strikes me as a much more trenchant indictment, one that holds up even at the top of the business cycle,

when the bourgeoisie and its apologists are drowning in complacency.

That indictment is Marx's vision of what modern bourgeois society forces people to be: They have to freeze their feelings for each other to adapt to a cold-blooded world. In the course of "pitilessly tear[ing] asunder the motley feudal ties," bourgeois society "has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.'" It has "drowned" every form of sentimental value "in the icy water of egotistical calculation." It has "resolved personal worth into exchange-value." It has collapsed every historical tradition and norm of freedom "into that single, unconscionable freedom—free trade." The worst thing about capitalism is that it forces people to become brutal in order to survive.

For 150 years, we have seen a huge literature that dramatizes the brutalization of the bourgeoisie, a class in which those who are most comfortable with brutality are most likely to succeed. But the same social forces are pressing on the members of that immense group that Marx calls "the modern working class." This class has been afflicted with a case of mistaken identity. Many readers have always thought that "working class" meant only factory workers, or industrial workers, or manual workers, or blue-collar workers, or impoverished workers. These readers then note the changing nature of the work force over the past half-century or so—increasingly white collar, educated, working in human services, in or near the middle class—and they infer the Death of the Subject, and conclude that all hopes for the working class are doomed. Marx did not think the working class was shrinking: In all industrial countries it already was, or was in the process of becoming, "the immense majority"; its swelling numbers would enable it to "win the battle of democracy." The basis for his political arithmetic was a concept that was both simple and highly inclusive:

The modern working class, developed... a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market.

The crucial factor is not working in a

factory, or working with your hands, or being poor. All these things can change with fluctuating supply and demand and technology and politics. The crucial reality is the need to sell your labor to capital in order to live, the need to carve up your personality for sale—to look at yourself in the mirror and think, “What have I got that I can sell?”—and an unending dread and anxiety that even if you’re O.K. today, you won’t find anyone who wants to buy what you have or what you are tomorrow, that the changing market will declare you (as it has already declared so many) worthless, that you will find yourself physically as well as metaphysically homeless and out in the cold. Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, a twentieth-century masterpiece, brings to life the consuming dread that may be the condition of most members of the working class in modern times. The whole existentialist tradition dramatizes this situation with great depth and beauty, yet its visions tend to be weirdly unembodied. Its visionaries could learn from the *Manifesto*, which gives modern anguish an address.

A great many people are in the working class but don’t know it. Many are the people who fill up the huge office buildings that choke all our downtowns. They wear elegant suits and return to nice houses, because there is a great demand for their labor right now, and they are doing well. They may identify happily with the owners, and have no idea how contingent and fleeting their benefits are. They may not discover who they really are, and where they belong, until they are laid off or fired—or de-skilled, outsourced, downsized. (It is fascinating how many of these crushing words are quite new.) And other workers, lacking diplomas, not dressed so nicely, working in cubicles, not offices, may not get the fact that many of the people who boss them around are really in their class. But this is what organizing and organizers are for.

One group whose working-class identity was crucial for Marx was the group to which he himself belonged: intellectuals.

The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to in reverent awe. It has transconverted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage labourers.

Marx is not saying that in bourgeois society these activities lose their human meaning or value. If anything, they are more meaningful and valuable than ever before. But the only way people can get the freedom to make discoveries, or save lives, or poetically light up the world, is by working for capital—for drug companies, movie

studios, boards of education, politicians, H.M.O.s, etc., etc.—and using their creative skills to help capital accumulate more capital. This means that intellectuals are subject not only to the stresses that afflict all modern workers but to a dread zone all their own. The more they care about their work and want it to mean something, the more they will find themselves in conflict with the keepers of the spreadsheets; the more they walk the line, the more they are likely to fall. This chronic pressure may give them a special insight into the need for workers to unite. But will united workers treat intellectual and artistic freedom with any more respect than capital treats it? It’s an open question; sometime in the twenty-first century the workers will get power somewhere, and then we’ll start to see.

Marx sees the modern working class as an immense worldwide community waiting to happen. Such large possibilities give the story of organizing a permanent gravity and grandeur. The process of creating unions is not just an item in interest-group politics but a vital part of what Lessing called “the education of the human race.” And it is not just educational but existential: the process of people individually and collectively discovering who they are. As they learn who they are, they will come to see that they need one another in order to be themselves. They will see, because workers are smart: Bourgeois society has forced them to be, in order to survive its constant upheavals. Marx knows they will get it by and by. (Alongside his fury as an agitator, the *Manifesto*’s author also projects a brooding, reflective, long patience.) Solidarity is not sacrifice of yourself but the self’s fulfillment. Learning to give yourself to other workers, who may look and sound very different from you but are like you in depth, gives a man or woman a place in the world and delivers the self from dread.

This is a vital part of the moral vision that underlies the *Manifesto*. But there is another moral dimension, asserted in a different key but humanly just as urgent. At one of the book’s many climactic moments, Marx says that the Revolution will end classes and class struggles, and this will make it possible to enjoy “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” Here Marx imagines communism as a way to make people happy. The first aspect of this happiness is “development”—that is, an experience that doesn’t simply repeat itself but that goes through some sort of change and growth. This model of happiness is modern, and informed by the incessantly developing bourgeois economy.

But bourgeois society, although it enables people to develop, forces them to develop in accord with market demands: What can sell gets developed; what can’t sell gets repressed, or never comes to life at all. Against the market model of forced and twisted development, Marx fights for “free development,” development that the self can control.

In a time when crass cruelty calls itself liberalism (we’re kicking you and your kids off welfare for your own good), it is important to see how much ground Marx shares with the best liberal of all, his contemporary John Stuart Mill. Like Marx, Mill came to see the self’s “free development” as a fundamental human value; like Marx, he believed that modernization made it possible for everybody. But as he grew older, he became convinced that the capitalist form of modernization—featuring cutthroat competition, class domination, social conformity and cruelty—blocked its best potentialities. He proclaimed himself a socialist in his old age.

Ironically, the ground that socialism and liberalism share might be a big problem for both of them. What if Mister Kurtz isn’t dead after all? In other words, what if authentically “free development” brings out horrific depths in human nature? Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche and Freud all forced us to face the horrors, and warned us of their permanence. In response, both Marx and Mill might say that until we have overcome social domination and degradation, there is simply no way to tell whether the horrors are inherent in human nature or whether we could create benign conditions under which they would wither away. The process of getting to that point—a point where Raskolnikovs won’t rot on Avenue D, and where Svidrigailovs won’t possess thousands of bodies and souls—should be enough to give us all steady work.

The nineties began with the mass destruction of Marx effigies. It was the “post-modern” age: We weren’t supposed to need big ideas. As the nineties end, we find ourselves in a dynamic global society ever more unified by downsizing, de-skilling and dread—just like the old man said. All of a sudden, the iconic looks more convincing than the ironic; that classic bearded presence, the atheist as biblical prophet, is back just in time for the millennium. At the dawn of the twentieth century, there were workers who were ready to die with the *Communist Manifesto*. At the dawn of the twenty-first, there may be even more who are ready to live with it. ■

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