

of the will, and whatever he might mean by the extinction of the will through acetic denial, it has something to do with the nothingness of nirvana. But pointing to this obscure doctrine is not much help if we are after an understanding of Schopenhauer's meaning here. What is left when the will is denied in the right way? What is nothing?

Schopenhauer has something of an answer to this. He argues that there is not a great deal positive which can be said about nothing. We cannot say anything positive because we cannot really know anything about nothing. Knowing requires a subject and an object known, and Schopenhauer is talking about the abolition of subject, object, space, time, understanding and the will itself. He can only point us to nirvana and similar, mystical talk of 'ecstasy, rapture, illumination, union with God, and so on'. If he cannot offer a positive account of nothing, perhaps predictably he has a go at negativity, at saying what nothing is not. As he puts it, perhaps too succinctly: 'No will: no representation, no world.' If there is any happiness at all in Schopenhauer's writings, you can hear the slightest murmur of it when he considers nothing, even if he has nothing positive to say about it: 'to those in whom the will has turned and denied itself, this very real world of ours with all its suns and galaxies is – nothing'.

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13 The Communist Manifesto

Karl Marx (1818–83)

The Communist Manifesto is short, sharp, clear and visionary. It has inspired generations of militants, political agitators, and many others of a less revolutionary bent. The book usually has both Marx and Friedrich Engels listed as authors, but it is clear that Marx drafted the bulk of it. Engels himself said that the book is 'essentially Marx's work'. We will refer only to Marx in what follows.

In order to understand the content and ambition of the *Manifesto* it is important to think a little about the times in which Marx wrote it. 1848 was a year of revolutionary upheaval. There were worker uprisings and revolts in the major industrial areas of Northern Europe. Working class discontent was in the air and something dramatic was expected to develop from the ferment of revolutionary activity. 'A spectre is haunting Europe', Marx writes, 'and that spectre is communism'. Communism is a power, he thought, and it was high time that the power had a coherent voice; this, anyway, was only part of Marx's aim in writing the *Manifesto*. His other aim was to change the world by hurrying it on to its last historical phase: communism. You can smell more than a whiff of Hegel here, and clearly Marx's historical materialism is a reworking of Hegel's conception of the Absolute becoming self-conscious in the phases of history. Instead of the Absolute realizing itself in history, Marx hopes that the working classes will realize their power. And use it.

Marx was commissioned to write a mission statement by the League of Communists. They were after a clear expression of their political goals to provide the focus for an expected revolution and its aftermath. Marx wrote the *Manifesto* in around six weeks, with drafts going back and forth between Engels and other supporters. Very few of those drafts survive, and many take this as evidence for the fact that Marx made few changes or adjustments to his original vision. No matter how it arose, the *Manifesto* is one of the most famous works of political philosophy.

It contains a summary of Marx's own philosophy of historical materialism, which was set out at great length by Marx and Engels in an earlier unpublished work, *The German Ideology*. The *Manifesto* also contains a strikingly prophetic vision about the future of capitalism. We will have a look at Marx's conception of history, his treatment of other forms of socialism, and finally glance at the work's prophetic content.

Historical materialism

The *Manifesto* contains a philosophy of history, what has come to be known as historical materialism. According to this view, and in line with Hegel, there is a pattern or shape to human history, and history is heading towards an end point. The end or goal is not, as Hegel would have it, an awareness of the process, but a certain sort of economic organization: communism. Before society is ready for communism, though, it must pass through certain stages of economic and social development. A large part of the book is a treatment of these stages, with a kind of hope that present workers who see the stages for what they are will do something about the current stage, namely change it. Marx is fomenting an historical push, and the book is meant to help history along.

Marx's theory of history does not attempt to explain human history as such, but account for the evolution of a part of it, namely our economic and social history. Marx's view begins with the claim that before any human collective can do or achieve anything worth achieving, individuals must be able to meet their fundamental material needs. Before all else, a person needs to eat, have clothing and have some sort of shelter from the elements. Societies and civilizations rely on particular 'modes of production' to secure the basic needs of living. In chapter one of the *Manifesto*, Marx sets out his view that the history of European civilization is characterized by progress from the ancient mode of production to the feudal mode, and from the feudal mode to the capitalist mode of production.

Marx argues that humans in pre-history simply foraged for their material requirements. They ate whatever animals and vegetation they found lying around; they used fur from the animals they devoured in order to clothe themselves; they sheltered in natural caves. According to Marx, human history proper started when humans actually produced things to meet their needs, rather than simply taking whatever nature served them. Particularly, human beings began to cultivate land in order to grow crops and build pens to rear animals for meat and fur. We began quarrying stone and chopping down trees in order to build huts and eventually villages.

With the beginnings of something like a civilized life, though, came social strata, the creation of unequal classes. Marx maintains that every productive set-up produces not just stuff, but a ruling class and a working class. The working class produces the stuff needed to survive, and the ruling class stands over them, appropriating the surplus of their labour. The workers, then, are always somehow exploited by the ruling class for the latter's own material needs and, ultimately, their excesses.

The earliest European modes of production dominated life in Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. Marx calls this epoch the 'ancient mode of production'. Here a class of masters has slave labour at its disposal. Other workers – craftsmen, artists, musicians, and so on – simply get plugged in around the basic economic relationship between the master and the slave. For example, the master trades part of the surplus produce of his slaves for the entertainment provided by his excellent dancing troupe and fine musicians. Throughout it all, it is the basic economic relationship which defines the times. The slave is the one producing what everyone else really requires, namely the necessities of food, clothing and shelter.

The feudal mode of production is next in line. Here the landed serf rather than the homebound slave produces the material needs of society. The serf enjoys a fractionally greater freedom than that of his enslaved predecessors. Serfs have some property rights which actually matter, namely the use of land, as well as a degree of power in determining when and how they deploy their labour. Still, Marx

notes, the land that serfs labour on is not really theirs; it is owned by the lords of the manor and, ultimately, by the monarch. The ruling classes demand a rent for the use of their land. In this way they appropriate the surplus production of serfs in order to provide for their own material needs and, it nearly goes without saying, their many excesses.

Marx argues that the feudal mode of production eventually gives way to the capitalist mode of production. Here wage-labourers, or the proletariat, become the main workers in society. The class of capitalists, not slave masters or feudal lords, stands over the working class, as the ruling class always has. The capitalist class exploits the proletariat and appropriates the surplus of their labour, now through the instruments of profit-making. Profit provides capitalists with the money for their own consumption, particularly their consumption of luxuries, as well as the money to invest in and control society's means of production. Money is now a way to make more money.

Part of the ambition of Marx's historical materialism is to reveal the economic workings of all societies. Another ambition, no doubt his principal one, is agitation for change, to push the inevitable course of human history along a little more quickly. The *Manifesto*, then, is a summary of Marx's historical materialism, a series of snapshots along the evolutionary road to the capitalist present. It is an argument for just one claim: the 'history of all hitherto existing societies is a history of class struggle'. Once you see history in terms of class struggle, Marx argues, your eyes are opened and you should want to do something about it. You should want to do something about it particularly if you are on the side of the worker, who by now looks like the present analogue of the slave or the serf.

Marx believes that once members of the working class become conscious of their own interests and their condition of exploitation by the ruling capitalist class, then they will inevitably rise up and bring forth a revolution which would lead to a society in which working-class interests would be better served. The worker uprisings of 1848 had already demonstrated that the proletarian class had a glimmering of the required sort of consciousness and were on the

way to realizing that their interests in life were being frustrated by the capitalist order and the economic system. The *Manifesto* is Marx's attempt to locate their vague hopes for social transformation in a story about the shape and final destiny of human history.

In the *Manifesto*, Marx anchors revolutionary proletarian ambitions in historical materialism, and this is a large break with the socialist thinking which came before him. The historical connection gets a large hearing and is the main point of the work's first two chapters. Chapter two also includes Marx's responses to anticipated bourgeois capitalist objections to the coming age of communism. In chapters three and four Marx changes tack and criticizes other socialist responses to the plight of proletarians in capitalist society.

Socialism before Marx was a simple but amorphous reaction to the evil effects of capitalism on human life. Socialist thinkers were generally horrified at how human beings were being forced to work and live, but the horror was directed at small-scale sorts of change. Socialist movements arose in order to improve the condition of workers in the face of capitalism but, for Marx, much more than minor changes were required. His fundamental objection to other sorts of socialist thinking is put in a medical metaphor. First, they fail to come to a complete diagnosis of the problem of life as a proletarian and, second, they fail to advance a suitable cure for this horrible condition.

Critique of socialism

So Marx takes up and criticizes three forms of socialism. Reactionary socialists think that we can and should undo the miserable effect of capitalism by simply going back to our feudal past. They claim that we were better off under feudalism and that the new capitalist order is a step backwards. Marx in no way wanted to downplay the misery which capitalism visits upon people; however, he argues that capitalism is some sort of advance on feudalism. Given his commitment to historical materialism, he has to think of it this way. So what you find

is Marx chastising reactionary socialists for their 'total incapacity to comprehend the march of modern history'. For Marx, capitalism delivers suffering but it also engenders the economic and political means of salvation from such suffering. It is a kind of step forward, so steps backwards are, for him, no help at all.

Marx also criticizes bourgeois socialists. These are socialists who can see the advantages that capitalism has brought to human society but think that its negative effects can be ameliorated in some way to make capitalism more palatable. Bourgeois socialists believe that capitalist society can be a steady, stable and harmonious form of economic organization if the rough edges are softened through socialist-minded reform. Marx rejects this version of socialism because, among other things, capitalism is a fundamentally class-ridden economic system. Where there are classes, there is a conflict of interests and, inevitably, exploitation. Conflict of interest and exploitation cannot just be finessed away, and, certainly, a society with exploitation in it cannot be stable or harmonious.

Marx also attacks variations on utopian socialism. Such socialists might be well-meaning, he argues, but their solutions to the workers' plight are naive. Utopian socialists certainly recognize the suffering of a capitalist system, but their blueprints for a happier society are, by Marx's lights, not radical enough and, possibly, rooted in a conception of human nature which is too good to be true. Utopian socialists such as Robert Owen conducted small-scale experiments in socialist living which he thought could simply be spread throughout an industrial economy. There was, Marx thought, no chance of this as long as the means of production were in the hands of capitalists.

According to Marx, what is fundamentally wrong with all three sorts of socialists is a general failure to perceive the revolutionary potential of the growing mass of proletarians in capitalist society. If society is to improve, if the lives of the working classes are to get any better, the transformation of society will have to be radical. What's needed is revolution. The *Manifesto* can be read as nothing less than a lesson in history for the proletariat, an attempt to make them see

their power and their historical destiny. The ultimate aim, as always for Marx, is to speed humanity closer to a better world.

Marx expected revolution from the proletariat. The *Manifesto* is imbued with that expectation and openly declares it. As noted at the start, the *Manifesto* reflects the time of its writing: 1848 was a year of revolutionary upheaval in the centres of capitalist industry in Europe. However, those revolutions eventually came to nothing and by 1849 had fizzled out. The course of capitalist development since Marx has led to the decline of traditional working-class and socialist movements. The proletariat never emerged, globally, as the agent for dramatic social change as Marx anticipated in the *Manifesto*. His prophecy really was falsified by subsequent history. However, there are other prophecies in the *Manifesto* which do seem to be confirmed by the course of history.

Other prophecies

The *Manifesto* does anticipate the spread of capitalism throughout the globe and the development of a 'world market' for goods and labour. Marx argued that no society on the planet will be left untouched by the reach of capitalism, and he was right about that. Indeed, Marx can be considered one of the first theorists of what is now called 'globalization'. Marx also anticipates the development of societies in which the small-mindedness of village life is dwarfed by the cosmopolitanism and internationalism of city-based life. Marx also saw the loss of traditionally secure and well-paid middle-class occupations and the rise and spread of the 'proletarianization' of professional work. Many think that these predictions have come true, and probably a lot of people think the world is worse for it.

Marx also anticipated a decline in the power of nationalist and religious thought, but, as we have witnessed in the twentieth century and at the unpleasant start of this millennium, wars stoked by nationalism and religion still seem to dominate human affairs. You can share Marx's hope that we will progress into a time without the

fictions and irrationalities of nationalism and religion, but it is clear that we are not there yet.

New marxists

The failure of the proletariat to perform the historical role which Marx anticipated for them in the *Manifesto* has led many to reject Marx's thinking. Some say that this is too quick. Maybe it is the case that the philosophy underpinning historical materialism is true and that Marx just got the timing wrong. The urgency of the time in which Marx wrote the *Manifesto* might have fuelled this mistake, if that is what it is. Still others maintain that Marx got the timing right, but object to the so-called fruits of communism. Many of Marx's predictions have come to pass, in the former Soviet Union, China and elsewhere, but communism in such places has resulted in a great deal of suffering and death. You can object to Marx on ethical grounds and leave quibbles about historical accuracy to others.

Some move on from the particulars of Marx, take lessons from history, and still hope for other kinds of revolutionary means which could secure a better world. Some see simple truths in Marx's historical materialism. They buy into the Marxist view that human beings exchange master–slave relations for lord–serf relations because of the improved productivity which these new relations promise. The lord–serf relationship grew and proliferated because it was better able to satisfy human needs and wants. Similarly, capitalist–worker relations arose because of the greater productivity which they delivered over the lord–serf relationship. But the final move, from capitalism to what New Marxists call 'true communism', has not been made. You can keep the story but drop Marx's insistence that then was the time for revolution. Maybe it is now.

Critics of capitalism, many with Marx in mind, note that capitalism need not be thought of as the summit of human history. They argue that it is not a steady, stable and harmonious economic system. Capitalism might deliver many advantages, they concede, but it

brings with it a large share of frustration and misery. As long as this is true, Marx will be relevant for us, they claim. The *Manifesto* provides us with an account of the human condition and it points to a solution to the problems we face in the part of our lives which depend on economics. It provides a model which suggests a way to refine our views of the problems and the solutions we might want to try in order to deliver a better world. In this, for many, lies the enduring relevance of *The Communist Manifesto*.