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On *The Communist Manifesto* and its historical
context

Anarcho

May 9, 2023

This review of China Miéville's book on the *Communist Manifesto* was written for the Marxist group Platypus. I was asked due to my speech *The 1848 Revolutions: An Anarchist Perspective*. Suffice to say, more could have been written but that speech plus the few links I've added to the text should help flesh out the arguments made.

The commentary on the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* must exceed the word count of that little pamphlet by a factor of thousands, if not more. To this grand number is added another, *A Spectre, Haunting: On The Communist Manifesto* (London: Head of Zeus, 2022) by British Marxist fantasy writer China Miéville.

As would be expected from his novels, this is a well written book but it is also marred by a tendency towards fantasy, for Miéville projects *his* politics backwards onto Marx. Yet there is over 150 years separating this book from the pamphlet it seeks to

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explain and yet, ironically given Marxist claims on the importance of praxis, Miéville's account singularly fails to discuss what activity the *Manifesto* contributed to during that time. He also fails to place it into its historical context and rather than discovering what was almost certainly meant, he projects backwards more appealing notions (usually honoured in the breach by Marxists) whose origins are to be found in another socialist school, anarchism.

To start with an obvious example, the question of democracy. Miéville writes:

[T]he first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class, to win the battle of democracy'... The traditional counterposing of democracy and communism is the result of decades of anticommunist propaganda. But in fact the problem for communists has, rather, been that the parliamentary democracy which is the only version on offer is not nearly democratic enough... communism [would be] a new kind of collaborative collectivity, more empowering *and more democratic*, at all levels, than any form of democracy hitherto seen

A few words – “to win the battle of democracy” – are doing a lot of heavy lifting here. It is simply assumed that Marx and Engels had this vision of “democracy” but there is nothing in the *Manifesto* to support it. After all, the “Principles of Communism”, written by Engels and which served as a draft for the *Manifesto*, states that a revolution “will inaugurate a *democratic constitution* and thereby, directly or indirectly, the political rule of the proletariat” and notes that “a democratic constitution has been introduced” in America. This is repeated in 1891:

If one thing is certain it is that our party and the working class can only come to power under the form of a

placing them in an alien context which nullifies their benefits, like the “infallible” recall Engels pointed to in 1891). This can be seen from the *Manifesto*'s discussion of property – ably summarised by Miéville – which is a straight lift from Proudhon's *What is Property?*. This can be seen from the reporting in *The Civil War in France*.

For an anarchist, it comes as no surprise that a serious engagement with anarchism is missing from the book – after all, the critiques of Bakunin and other anarchists were proven right and mentioning this would be hard to square with positively evaluating the *Manifesto*. Sadly, space excludes further discussion but hopefully this review will prompt an investigation of what anarchism stands for based on what anarchists – rather than Marxists – have written about it. *An Anarchist FAQ* would be a good starting point, particularly as it discusses in Section H all the issues raised here.

poses', but must transform it", this does not address *how* that transforming would take place – social democrats like Kautsky and Martov considered it obvious that this would be done in-line with the *Manifesto*, by electoral means. Nor can it really be said that these much-quoted words from *The Civil War in France* really present “a new focus on questions of politics and political form, by which economic change might be attempted” for the *means* suggested to secure political power are not mentioned at all. In this, Miéville – like Lenin in *The State and Revolution* – ignores or misreads far too many comments by the *Manifesto*'s authors.

Whether in the degeneration of social democracy or the transformation of the hope of the Russian Revolution into the reality of state-capitalist party dictatorship, the *Manifesto* looms large – for it paved the way for both. Yet its vision of “the fulfilment of human need and the flowering of human potential, on the basis of communal, democratically controlled social property” is appealing. The question is whether the *Manifesto* can secure that or not. The evidence of over 150 years of praxis inspired by it is clear – it did not, *for it cannot*. To make that vision a reality, we need to turn to another socialist tradition, that of anarchism.

Anarchism is mentioned when Miéville discusses the *Manifesto*'s bizarre labelling of Proudhon's *Philosophy of Poverty* as “an example” of “bourgeois socialism”. Indeed, he is right to say that this “is questionable. Proudhon was and is famous as an anarchist thinker committed to fundamental social change, and profoundly opposed to the bourgeois state.” Not only that, Marx had suggested in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (when not seriously distorting what Proudhon had argued) that he was a “petit bourgeois” – why this insult was changed just for the *Manifesto* has never been explained and Miéville's suggestion (that it “was designed as much as anything to troll Proudhon”) is as good as any. Of course, Marx being “deeply opposed to anarchism in general and Proudhon in particular” never stopped him from borrowing, without acknowledgement, many of his ideas (albeit

democratic republic. This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the Great French Revolution has already shown... the proletariat can only use the form of the one and indivisible republic... How self-government is to be organised and how we can manage without a bureaucracy has been shown to us by America and the First French Republic...

In short, by “democracy” they simply did not mean Miéville's vision at all. As Engels noted in 1895, it meant simply “the winning of universal suffrage”.

The root cause of this is undoubtedly that Marx and Engels do “outline the bourgeoisie's capturing of political power and eulogise its political, economic and spiritual impact on the world”, which is a problem as Communism is seen as the next stage from capitalism which builds upon – and utilises – what the bourgeoisie creates. It does not ponder whether the structures created by the bourgeoisie (a minority) to secure its position as the ruling class *can* be used by the people (the majority) nor the fundamental difference that the bourgeoisie had economic power before taking over political power, while the proletariat secures political power to have economic power. Neither does Miéville.

Nor does Miéville query whether concentrating political power into a few hands as the State does really mean popular power. Ironically, in 1891 Engels indicated the reality of America's “democratic constitution” and how it failed to stop societal organs like “the state power..., in pursuance of their own special interests, transform[ing] themselves from the servants of society into the masters of society... in America... there exists... no bureaucracy with permanent posts or the right to pensions, and nevertheless... the nation is powerless against these two great cartels of politicians, who are ostensibly its servants, but in reality exploit and plunder it.”

Miéville himself laments the reality of the American system in undermining democracy, such as “the extraordinary

anti-democratic power of the Senate” and the “avowedly antidemocratic” Constitution. And yet this is the model Engels had in mind when the *Manifesto* was penned and in 1891 – even after admitting its reality.

The fact is that democracy is used to refer to a wide-range of possibilities – from the nominally democratic (whereby a few leaders are elected to administer a centralised and bureaucratic top-down structure every few years) to that based on meaningful participation and self-government (a self-managed bottom-up federation) – and Marxists have favoured the former and disparaged the latter despite at times recognising the realities of these hierarchical systems.

What of the relationship between socialists (“party”) and class? True, there is an admission of “the unedifying elitism of some activists” but this is not allowed to stop the conclusion that “a party model doesn’t imply a hierarchical top-down model of persuasion” even though it always has.

This flows from the *Manifesto*, which proclaims that the Communists are “the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties” and have “theoretically... over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.” What happens if the “the great mass of the proletariat” disagree with the policies of the party? Given that there is a State modelled on the bourgeois republic which invests the party leadership with substantial power, this is an important question – and we have the answer as Marxist regimes *have* repressed the proletariat because of the “advantage of clearly understanding” what is *really* in its interests.

Thus class consciousness is equated with how much the class agrees with the party leadership – who appear to be non-proletarians for, lest we forget, “a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class” and this “portion of the bourgeois ideologists” have “raised themselves to

Another complaint may be the lack of discussion of the Paris Commune. Indeed, it is true that the Commune is “crucial for later readings of the *Manifesto*” but that does not mean failing to understand what was meant in 1848 – particularly as this work rather than *The Civil War in France* informed the actual practice of Marxists. Nor should we forget that if the Parisian workers had listened to Marx then the Commune would never have happened and so he would never have enlightened us on what he “really” had in mind.

Yet even that is not quite right, given that most of *The Civil War in France* is simply *reporting* on events by people with other ideas. That many of the Communards were influenced by Proudhon should go without saying – and his rival’s influence *does* go unmentioned by Marx while its manifestations are praised. It may have “inaugurated radical innovations to maintain organic links between the administrative apparatus and the working class” but it did so by applying libertarian ideas which had been circulating within the French working class for years. Moreover, the robustness of any “organic link” simply cannot be asserted – Marx can be forgiven as he was writing in London based on limited knowledge but anarchists have been exploring the limitations of the Commune since Kropotkin’s earliest articles, limitations relevant to subsequent revolutions.

What of the political and economic forms praised in 1871? Is it unfair to Marx and Engels to expect them to anticipate in 1848 such future developments? No, for Proudhon’s election manifesto of the same year included calls for mandates and recall, the fusion of executive and legislative functions as well as democratic associations to run industry. This also shows why any suggestion that ideas like workers’ control were a given for Marx and so did not need to be stated is unconvincing, given for that Proudhon publicly raised such ideas in order to differentiate his ideas from what passed for socialism then.

As for the lesson “that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own pur-

mark, wars to “civilise” or “wipe out” *non-historic peoples* – nor their casual racism (mostly against Slavs but Engels also found time to be happy “that magnificent California was snatched from the lazy Mexicans, who did not know what to do with it” by “the energetic Yankees”). As well as a rejection of Internationalism in practice, there was also an opposition to the right of national self-determination as advocated by Bakunin.

Given this, in spite of its many merits which Miéville ably summarises, perhaps if the *Manifesto* had gone “the way of all the hundreds of other angry radical documents of the nineteenth century”, then we would be closer to socialism now. After all, why something which should be self-contained – a pamphlet – needs such clarification is an indictment in itself. That there is a whole series of books explaining “what Marx really meant” is significant. Indeed, this review will be met with complaints that some obscure passage in a text published long after both Marx and Engels were in the grave has gone unmentioned – for some, anarchist critiques of Marxism fail because they do not take into account such writings (this does not stop the likes of Lenin and Trotsky, equally unaware of these texts, from being true Marxists). However, we need to look at what was written in the text and determine what it would mean then.

Which is why it is important to understand what readers at the time would understand by the words used. Terms like “association” or “democracy” have a wide meaning. It can mean a federation of self-managed workers’ associations in which managers are elected and decisions made by workplace assemblies. It can also mean a situation in which everyone amongst millions or billions get to elect a central body once every few years which then creates a “common plan” which its appointed managers tell the workers to execute. One is obviously more appealing than the other, but both do fit the same term. That the *Manifesto* does not indicate what it means suggests that we need to take the most likely meaning, the second vision.

the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole.” Sadly, Miéville does not discuss whether this could *not* produce the “elitism” and “hierarchical top-down model” which he bemoans.

Nor can economic transformation solve the problem for the economic vision of the *Manifesto* is limited. There is no mention of workers’ management of production: nationalisation is the demand, not socialisation. Miéville does not mention this, saying that it “is committed to some model of communal democratic ownership, in place of the existing system of individual private property, profit and competitive accumulation.” But what model is being advocated? Not “communal ownership of productive capacity” nor “democratic grassroots control of society’s productive capacity”, but centralised *State* ownership and control.

The famous ten demands of the *Manifesto* are paraphrased and sanitised – no “industrial armies” (so avoiding having to mention Trotsky’s ideas in 1920) and no “common plan” (so avoiding having to discuss its practicality whether then or now) while “the abolition of children’s factory labour in its present form” becomes “abolition of child labour”. The demands urging the “centralisation” of economic activity “into the hands of the State” are not discussed. It is, rightly, noted that “[s]ome of these now read as remarkably mild” which “hardly necessitate the overturning of capitalism. Others... even if in the abstract compatible with capitalism in some form, seem highly unlikely ever to be permitted by actually existing capitalists.” Yet, most of them can be – and have been – applied under capitalism. State ownership and control is compatible with capitalism and is in no way socialist (nor even has to have socialists in office to be achieved).

Strangely, there is no discussion on how the *Manifesto*’s measures produce state-capitalism, the state as boss employing wage-workers, organising their labour, keeping their products and allocating both as it sees fit.

That this is what was intended is justified by the historical context. In late 1886 Marx's daughter and her husband were touring America and as well as urging using the ballot-box to "conquer political power" in order to then "conquer economic power", they gave the telling example of the "post-office, a great and immense institution is worked... [b]y the community, for the benefit of the community. That is socialism... you have already a socialistic institution, the post-office." Lenin later gave the same example. Yet there is no workers' control in the post office and whatever democracy exists is simply that the representatives elected to govern the people also overview its activities.

Miéville does mention that in the 1872 German preface the authors "discouraged excessive focus on those 'revolutionary measures'" and suggests that "none of these particular measures were shibboleths even as stepping stones", yet this is disingenuous given that every Marxist party and regime has used them as a template for what it considered "socialism" and as policies precisely *because* of their place in the *Manifesto* (and lack of alternatives elsewhere).

There is a complete lack of concern about adding economic power to political power. This blindness flows from the *Manifesto* which nowhere suggests that the State itself – and the bureaucracy which any such centralised and hierarchical social organisation produces – has interests of its own, is a class in itself. It is relegated to simply a machine utilised by whatever class happens to "win the battle of democracy" (elect the executive). Given this perspective, it is unproblematic to centralise into its hands more and more functions.

Significantly, Engels' analysis in 1891 of America's woes failed to see that the American State then lacked a large bureaucracy simply because it did little beyond protect property and repress proletarian and indigenous rebellions. As its activities increased, so has its bureaucracy. And by recommending that we centralise economic activities into the hands of the State, the *Manifesto* hands them over to the bureaucracy and creates state-capitalism.

"top-down and authoritarian politics diametrically opposed to the grassroots democracy of socialism" only "emerged" in Russia when "Socialism in One Country" was raised... in 1925!

So like most Marxists, he seems unaware how quickly the Bolshevik regime became a State in the usual sense and then a *de facto* one-party state-capitalist dictatorship. Significantly, the ideology of the ruling party quickly and easily adapted itself to this reality, proclaiming to the world the necessity of party dictatorship to ensure a "successful" revolution and urging socialists across the globe to follow their example. Sadly, many did – and we are still suffering the consequences.

The issue of praxis also applies to the 1848 Revolution. While the *Manifesto* played no role in events, Germany saw contradictions between rhetoric and reality.

It is suggested that its authors were "[u]tterly committed to the cause of the working class as the far-left edge of the democratic revolution, they held that, as a bourgeois revolution, this democratic republic had to be ushered in by the bourgeoisie as part of a class alliance against the old rulers", yet in reality they completely subordinated the workers to the bourgeoisie and hid the politics of the *Manifesto*. As Miéville notes, this position eventually changed, and they argued that workers should press their own demands (but still in response to the demands of the bourgeoisie) but then argued workers had to "strive for a single and indivisible German republic, but also within this republic for the most determined centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority", failing to see that this not only allowed the bourgeoisie to abolish the "remnants of the Middle Ages" but also to crush the proletariat for strengthening the bourgeois State would make the overthrow of capitalism harder.

Likewise, it is strange to read that, "[f]or the *Manifesto*, internationalism is a sine qua non of the workers' movement, and of any successful revolution" but no mention that there was not a war in which Marx and Engels did not take sides, nor of their warmongering during the 1848 Revolutions – war with Russia and Den-

The underlying fallacy is clear: “by whatever means are available” ignores that what is relevant are means which *result in the objective desired*. If we wish socialism, we need means which take us towards that rather than away from it. Drawing of (elements) of the labour movement into parliamentarianism may have been inevitable (and far easier than organising militant unions), what was not inevitable was spinning this activity as somehow revolutionary. In this, the *Manifesto* provided a radical camouflage under which reformism grew and constructive socialism withered – as Bakunin predicted.

What of the revolutionary path? If the “dictatorship of the proletariat” refers to a multi-party democratic system then it has only existed for a brief period from November 1917 to around July 1918, a period also marked – in the political sphere – by centralisation of power into fewer and fewer hands, the side-lining of soviet assemblies, bureaucratisation, popular alienation and the creation of armed forces separate from the people (a secret police and an undemocratic Red Army) to repress any expression of that alienation in the shape of protests, strikes and electing the wrong people to soviets. In the economic sphere, the party implemented policies which centralised economic activity and power into the hands of the State, so building a state-capitalism based on state-appointed managers armed with “dictatorial” authority (to use Lenin’s word). The vision of “socialism” inherited from the *Manifesto* was used to combat the *genuine* socialistic attempts made by workers to exercise economic power (such as the factory committees) as not being socialist (usually dismissed as “anarchist dreams”). Significantly, this authoritarianism began well before civil war started.

Yet Miéville is right to lament that “strain of showboating machismo within the Left that treats consideration of any revolutionary parameters other than more or less precisely those of St Petersburg October 1917... as effete perfidy”, particularly as those who do so fail to understand the reality of that event and its aftermath. This applies to Miéville himself as he believes that

Given that Miéville was a member of the British SWP which prided itself in recognising Stalinism as state-capitalism (ignoring both the belatedness as well as the weakness of that specific analysis), it seems strange that there is no mention how the demands of the *Manifesto* mirror the reality of Stalinist Russia, that they simply changed who the workers are exploited and oppressed by, from the boss to the bureaucrat.

It may be objected that Marx and Engels hated bureaucracy and sought to destroy it. Indeed, but their policies made a growth in its size and power inevitable – as shown by the Bolsheviks who likewise railed against bureaucrats while their number, power and privileges grew. Reality will always overcome rhetoric.

This shows the fallacy in the *Manifesto*’s notion that after “all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character” for this “is merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another.” Yet the “public power” itself remains, after all it has centralised and is managing the whole economic life of the nation (or world). Given this, any change is merely a change of words for it is based on class being defined by ownership of the means of production by individuals rather than by a collective body like a State.

Thus we have the structural and ideological preconditions for the rule of an ever-reducing minority – of the proletariat over the peasant and artisan majority, of the elected party over the proletariat, of the (non-proletariat) leadership over the party. This “one and indivisible republic” which combines political and economic remits (and so power) would inevitably spawn around it a bureaucracy in its attempts to make and implement its decisions and so a new ruling class would be forged proclaiming it knows what is best for the masses.

This, of course, summarises Bakunin’s prophetic critique of Marx but unfortunately the chapter “Criticisms of the *Manifesto*” looks elsewhere at more easily refutable critics from the right.

For an ideology which claims to stress praxis, Marxists seem less than keen to discuss Marxism's legacy. This work is no exception. It is noted that "the 1870s began the turnaround for the text in earnest" and "there commenced then forty years of the rise of social-democratic labour parties" while "1917, the Russian Revolution, was a key turning point" when "the leaders of the massive and powerful state... declare[d] their fidelity to the text". Sadly, he does not mention how both these developments had a distinctly negative impact on socialism – the former degenerated into reformism, the latter produced state-capitalism.

So while the "unhappy history of many self-styled Marxist parties in and out of power" is mentioned, this does not dent the "conviction of the necessity of a revolutionary party for a ruptural politic".

Taking the path of "political action", given the failure of Social Democracy, the Greens, SYRIZA (imposing the austerity it was elected to stop) and so many others, can we *really* say "the relationship of the socialist movement to the state is open to debate"? How many times are we to go down the same path and expect to end up somewhere else? Can it still be hoped that rhetoric will defeat reality?

Yet there is no contradiction – as is implied – between the *Manifesto* and its authors "repeatedly moot[ing] the possibility of non-violent social transformation in certain circumstances". These circumstances were twofold – universal suffrage (in the *Manifesto*) and the lack of a bureaucracy inherited from absolutism (post-*Manifesto*). Yet the first factor seemed to outweigh the second, as can be seen when Engels proclaimed France as joining America, Britain and Holland as countries suitable for a purely ballot-box revolution. As such, the *Manifesto* was "blind" – to use Miéville's words – "to the structural opposition to meaningful reform, let alone rupture, baked into bourgeois states" which are also "very often overtly anti-democratic, too, constraining ruptural or even reformist possibilities from without and within." Sadly, the strat-

egy recommended did nothing to cure that blindness and in fact maintains it – as can be seen by this passing attempt to engage with the anti-parliamentarian position:

"Excepting certain left anarchists and so-called 'ultra-leftists', for whom any involvement at all with the existing state is to be shunned, most revolutionary communists, including Marx, consider the push for reforms by whatever means are available to be crucial to the process of gaining strength towards the ultimate aim."

Ignoring the pointless placing of "left" before anarchist (it is like saying Marxists are "left socialists" and Nazis are "right socialists"), shunning the State does *not* preclude "the push for reforms" as anarchists have always argued that these should be won by collective direct action rather than be left to politicians acting on our behalf. This does involve "gaining strength" in a way which electioneering does not, indeed undermines (compare the response of the German labour movement in 1933 with that of the Spanish in 1936). Anti-parliamentarianism does not mean ignoring the State but rather fighting it with the same weapons used to fight capital.

There is the admission that "the struggle may be considerably harder than Marx and Engels imagined" but no acknowledgement that the tactics they advocated ("political action", electioneering) contributed immensely to that. That said, it is right to say that "this doesn't in and of itself invalidate their view of the working class as the 'agent of history' capable of overturning oppression and exploitation." The question is learning the lessons of that struggle, something this book avoids – for obvious reasons. True, in the short-term votes and parties may grow, but in the long-term, socialism – which is the point! – grows ever distant. Rather than socialists conquering power, power conquers the socialists; rather than the State withering away, socialism does.