

## **The Communist Manifesto:** Anniversary Reflections

Shortly after my retirement I began to sort out my library and decided to get rid of books and papers which had either dated information or had lost their relevance for me. One work I removed from my library was *The Communist Manifesto*. I should have kept it. I never expected that the 150th anniversary of its publication would be a cause of celebrations and conferences in London, Paris and Toronto. I thought that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the utter failure of its communist experience would be a sufficient deterrent for celebrating a piece of revolutionary writing that provoked so much bloodshed. Several new editions of the Manifesto have been published, including a modern one by the new left publisher Verso at the cost of \$17.00. A steep capitalist price for 87 pages! The Merlin Press's austere red cover edition sells for just a few dollars. Since I needed another copy for the writing of this article, I was able to buy The Marx-Engels Reader, which includes the Manifesto with an introduction, for 50 cents at a public library sale. A real bargain!

### **Arousing revolution**

The 19th century birthed many socialist theories and programs. Marxism at mid-century was only one of numerous versions of socialist thought. But it triumphed over all other theories through the consistent and vigorous efforts of Karl Marx (1818-83) and Friedrich Engels (1820-95), who wrote *The Communist Manifesto* on behalf of the "League of the Just." The members of this league were German radical workers living in Paris, a secret revolutionary society that Marx joined with intention of bringing it out into the open. The name was later changed to "Communist League."

The Manifesto was originally published in London in February 1848, the year in which revolutions raged throughout Europe. A French version appeared in Paris shortly before the June insurrection of 1848. The British historian Eric Hobsbawm says, in his introduction to Verso's 150th anniversary edition, that it is "by far the most influential single piece of political writing since the French Revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens." Marx and Engels wrote it with furious passion and inflammatory rhetoric.

Its basic thought is that all history has been a history of class struggles. Society consists of two great hostile camps directly facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat. Every class struggle is a political struggle. The proletariat, the labourers, are a commodity and exposed to all the changes of fortunes of the market. They sell their labour power. Workers are no more than appendages of machines. Law, morality and religion are bourgeois prejudices for the proletarian. The aim of proletarian communism is the overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy and conquest of political power, the abolition of private property, the abolition of the family, the abolition of religion, and the centralization of all instruments of production in the hands of the state. A new world must be reconstructed and birth must be given to a new humanity.

Marx had no use for religion. He called it the "opium of the people." In his opinion, it gave only a false sense of meaning to a life which is basically without a purpose. It is no more than an attempt to flee from economic misery into a world of imagination.

Marx and Engels declared that Communists everywhere would support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things. World revolution was certain. Capitalism would wither away. The classless society would surely come. Communism would be embraced everywhere. They concluded their Manifesto with their famous call to arms:

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

### **The impact of Marxism**

Classical Marxism, as the philosophy of Marx and Engels may be called, has profoundly impacted men's view of history, society, economics, ideology, politics and even theology.

One of Marx's famous sayings is, "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it." And Marx and his followers have indeed brought about tremendous changes. For hundreds of millions of people, he became either an incarnation of Satan or the prophet of the new world of social and political peace which would follow the dictatorship of the proletariat. The influence of Marx has been paramount on all the revolutionary movements of the 20th century. Communist leaders such as Cuba's Fidel Castro, China's Mao Tse-tung, and Cambodia's Pol Pot based their revolutionary-totalitarian-evil programs on Marx's writings. When we lived in the Philippines, we met a young communist Filipino who was totally committed to Maoism. He was ready to take lives and to give his life for the party.

### **Man his own saviour**

For Marx, man is not an unique being created in the image of God. He is consistent in his materialistic view of the world. Man is no more than a thing, although a powerful thing. He is essentially a producer. He has the ability and the power to create a new world. His full potential is waiting to be realized in the brave new world of communism. As in every revolutionary moment, Marxism has the ardent desire to break with the past in order to create something entirely new. It is a futuristic faith. A Marxist will say, "We know a revolutionary is not going to right wrongs overnight. But some day a new and harmonious world will come as a result of our sacrificial efforts." In other words, one, two, or three generations must be sacrificed to bring about a glorious future!

### **Intolerance of revolutionaries**

Marxism calls upon the proletariat to arise and to seize control of the state. Its revolutionary ideology is out to turn the world upside down; it embraces every area of life. Everything must serve the ideal of a future proletarian paradise. For the Marxist revolution is always right and revolutionary action is always exemplary. Law, morals, religion, science and art are all to serve the communist ideal. This implies that communism cannot tolerate any opposition. Therefore, any means to win the revolution is permissible. Lenin (1870-1924), the principal figure in Russia's communist revolution and the first political leader to put his version of Marxism into practice, went to extremes to achieve his goals. Already in 1891, when a severe famine ravaged a part of Russia, which cost the lives of thousands, the then 21-year old Lenin resisted any attempt to offer assistance, so that the cause of communism could be advanced. He said:

The famine is the direct consequence of particular social order. So long as that order exists, famines are inevitable. They can be abolished only by the abolition of that order of society. Being in this sense inevitable, famine today performs a progressive function.... Psychologically this talk of feeding the starving is nothing but an expression of the saccharine sweet sentimentality of our intelligentsia.

Lenin believed that a reign of terror was necessary for the subjection of Russia to communism. He declared that no dictatorship of the proletariat can exist without terror and force.

Appalling massacres have marked all Communist revolutions since 1917. And these revolutions have not lifted people out of poverty but plunged them deeper into it. The Khmer people in Cambodia never witnessed such utter misery, poverty, and murderous devastation as under Pol Pot, who dreamed about an agricultural cashless-peasant paradise. Under his brutal regime, more than 2.5 million Cambodians lost their lives. Chinese friends, who recently immigrated to Canada, have told me about the horrific oppression they suffered under Mao. Each day they had to spend one hour reading his works. They were constantly to remind themselves of the thoughts of Mao. They had no freedom of speech. Every aspect of their lives was controlled. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-69), countless thousands of political dissidents - as well as historians, Christian leaders, teachers, authors, poets and even painters - were imprisoned. When I see the Communist experiment in practice in Cambodia, China and Russia, I am overwhelmed by its stifling of the human spirit. Its legacy is bureaucracy, dictatorship, conformism, work camps, and so on. Marxism in effect negates everything human.

The story of the Soviet Union's oppressive nature is now well-known and carefully documented. Lenin's successor, Joseph Stalin (1879-1953), "refined" the art of terror. He further cultivated the totalitarian policies of the communist regime. His secret police ruthlessly purged political and military opponents, real and imagined. His rule of terror was characterized by the development of a personality cult and a sophisticated propaganda machine. Stalin demanded complete adulation from his own captive people. And all the while, many in the West believed that Stalin had established the Marxist paradise.

When the famous British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge went to Russia in 1932, he expected to find a perfect society created by Lenin's October Revolution. His dream was soon shattered. What he found was "chicanery, brutality, and dictatorship." He said that where he had looked to find a new and better society, he found new and a better method of enslavement.

Stalin brooked no opposition. Stalin's cruelty knew no bounds. He let Polish communist leaders, who had fought in the First International Brigade during the Spanish civil war, come to Russia. Their journey became an engagement with death. All were murdered. Hundreds of lesser known men were put into concentration camps in Polish territory.

In the 1920s and 30s the Communist Party of the United States depicted the Soviet Union as a workers' paradise and assisted in the return of thousands of Finnish-Americans to the Soviet Union, who settled in the Karelian region bordering Finland to help build communism. Their dream of a paradise turned into a nightmare when in 1936-38 Soviet security police arrested several hundreds - perhaps more than a thousand - of North American Finnish immigrants (mostly adult males) and charged them with having been spies for Finland or another foreign power.

Stalin developed agricultural collectivization, despite the opposition of the peasant population. With great callousness Stalin launched a programme of liquidation of the kulaks - the richer peasants. Populations of entire villages were deported, leaving them empty and deserted. It is estimated that more than 10 million became victims of famine or of summary executions.

### **Marxism: the opium of intellectuals**

Despite the brutality of the Soviet Union's regime, in the eyes of many in the Western world, Joseph Stalin and Stalinism could do no wrong. The chattering intellectuals of the left were fiercely hostile to any mention of Stalinist dictatorship or concentration camps which were known to exist. In his account of his stay in Moscow, Muggeridge remarked on the inconceivable credulity and naivety of Western reporters, their readiness to believe anything, however absurd, whatever Soviet officials dished up. They arrived in Moscow resolved to see what they had come to see and hear, their faith in Marxism unshakable. When people pointed out the evils committed by the Soviet regime, the incredulous reply was often, "Even if concentration camps exist in the Soviet Union, it remains the home of socialism and the true revolution. The Soviet camps have nothing in common with Hitler's and Soviet dictatorship has nothing in common with Nazi totalitarianism. The important thing is the Soviet regime's purpose: justice and victory of the poor, of course. We must not criticize the Soviet Union; that just plays into the hands of the reactionaries. We must accompany the Communists as they make their way."

The intellectuals of the left have always been very inconsistent in their protests against wrongdoing. They were the first to protest American involvement in Vietnam, but after its fall to communism the brutal oppression by the communist victors has gone virtually unmentioned. Why the double standard?

What I find difficult to understand is the current incredible credulity of intellectuals still enchanted by Marxism after all the horrific news about the Soviet Union bloody history has been revealed. Do they wear blinders? Do they only see what they want to see? Someone told me that the only Marxists in the West can be found in universities. Professor David McLennan of the University of Kent, Canterbury, even talks about "the migration of Marxism into the universities." This current fascination with contemporary Marxism has been called by Raymond Aron "the opium of the intellectuals," a takeoff on Marx's own description of religion as "the opium of the people." How else can one explain the fanfare greeting the 150th anniversary of the Manifesto?

## **Liberation theology**

What I find even more hard to grasp is the impact Marxism has made on theology. Some Latin American theologians attempt to intertwine biblical theology with Marxism. They borrow some of their language and insights from Marxism. And they identify with the oppressed as Marxism identifies and designates them. They try to live with one foot in Christianity and with the other in some form of Marxism. They equate the poor with "God's chosen people" and focus on "the option for the poor" as a way of life. The service of the poor constitutes our entire service to God. In liberation theology, the poor person becomes a kind of a priest, a mediator between God and man, as we can meet God only through him. The poor person is always the sacrificial victim.

Since most liberation theologians are Roman Catholic, they seem to be particularly attracted to this new service theology. The French theologian Jacques Ellul astutely observed that it is an expression of the typical Catholic personality because of its thirst for good works, particularly in the social plane, and faith taking a backseat with respect to works. And he notes, "The desire for social and political commitment represents the ongoing tradition of the Catholic Church, which has always claimed to mold society's social and political structures."

Liberation theologians argue that the poor do not just happen; they are created by structures and institutions that create the poor. Hence liberation theology is a critique of structures and institutions that create the poor, including modern Christianity, which has identified with the rich. In their eyes, the Church has served the powerful and the wealthy, and sided with the oppressors rather than with the oppressed. The emphasis falls on human horizontal relationships to the exclusion of the vertical relationship with the God of the Scriptures. In the process, they mutilate Christianity. And there is among the liberation theologians a growing appreciation of indigenous religious practices, African-American religions, animistic traditions, the practice of magic, and so on.

Liberation theologians view Christianity through Marxist lenses. They have their own analysis of Scriptures and argue that the Bible must be read against the background of exploitation, injustice and oppression. Sin is not rebellion against God. Man lives in alienation because of social injustice. Salvation comes through human efforts. God intervenes in our history only through our own hands. Mankind must liberate itself. And

politics is the way to achieve salvation. In other words, liberation theology confesses an earthly, political, here-and-now liberation. The task of Christianity is to discern God's activity amid the poor and work for a radical transformation of the structures of society in order that all human beings may live in perfect harmony in this new utopia.

Jesus Christ is cast into a political role. He is seen as a political rebel, in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. He drew his followers from the poor and those who resisted the Roman occupiers. He opposed the rich, the powerful and the money changers in the temple. John Sobrino of El Salvador says that following Jesus means going into the struggle against oppression and for liberation. The main issue for these "Marxist Christians" is the class struggle. Jacques Ellul claims that this is their litany:

Jesus identified Himself with the poor:  
Every poor person is Jesus Himself.  
Every poor person must be defended.  
If we fail to defend him, we attack him.  
Failing to struggle on behalf of the poor means we reject Jesus....  
All those who work for human liberation are true to Jesus, whatever their methods.

In my view, liberation theology is just another version of Marxism with a Christian veneer. I agree with Jacques Ellul's assessment. He observed that it offers nothing beyond what socialism has said to the poor, and deprives them of the unique, irreplaceable dimension that the gospel gives to hope. In Latin America, liberation theology has not attracted many followers. The churches that are growing there are within the evangelical and Pentecostal camps. The small Reformed-Presbyterian churches opposed to liberation theology are also experiencing an increase in membership. John Calvin Seminary in Mexico City, which receives support from Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Churches, is a Calvinist stronghold combatting liberation theology, while teaching the full gospel for all of life.

## **Conclusion**

The anniversary of the Communist Manifesto is not a cause for celebration. The world is still reeling from its disastrous and bloody impact on history. We rejoice in the fall of the Soviet Union and the freedoms brought to millions formerly enslaved behind the Iron Curtain. We can point to the errors and follies of materialistic communism, but it is dangerous to succumb to triumphalism. In the Western world we have our own barbarisms, such as the horrific abortion rate, and the increasing rate of approval of euthanasia. Western nations have adopted policies which are in conflict with God's will as revealed in Scripture. And is our own relationship with our Lord of such a nature that as a consequence we serve the poor and seek justice for the oppressed? Do we put into practice our confession as formulated by the Heidelberg Catechism? Our opposition to Marxism must be accompanied by deeds.

To be sure, Christ has redeemed us by his blood. But we do good because Christ by his Spirit is also renewing us to be like Himself, so that in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all He has done for us, and so that He may be praised through us. And we do good so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbours may be won over to Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 32, A. 86).

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