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The Centenary of the *Communist Manifesto*

By FRANCIS NEILSON

IT IS ONE HUNDRED YEARS since Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were deputed to draw up a party program for the Communist League. They set to work upon this task at a time when Europe was experiencing one of her most serious political and industrial crises. The conditions in nearly every channel of activity in her principal States were shocking enough but, so far as the workers in industry were concerned, matters were near the breaking point. No two men ever grappled with a problem with more hope of success than Marx and Engels. The signs of victory for the cause they represented were in the air, and during the preceding year, when the Congress of the League had met in London, the signals of a triumph for the proletariat were many.

The Condition of Europe in 1848

IT IS VERY DIFFICULT for the student of this generation to picture the deepening distresses of that day, and those who read the *Communist Manifesto* and cast it aside as a frothy

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document scarcely worth reading do so because their minds are fixed upon entirely different industrial and social conditions—so different, indeed, that those with which Marx and Engels had to deal seem absurd. Yet, if one desires to understand what actuated these men, it is necessary to turn to the history of Europe as it recounts the story from the time of the French Revolution until the failure of the upheaval of 1848. There are many excellent works that deal with this period.

It is sometimes claimed that the Manifesto was responsible for the insurrection in Paris of June, one hundred years ago. Others have imagined that its appeal brought forth the revolutionary uprisings that afflicted Germany and Austria. That it had a great effect, no one can deny, but the sore which ailed Europe had been festering for generations before Marx and Engels were born. However, the Manifesto's influence was short lived, and all the hopes that had been raised by the clashes in European States were frittered away within a twelvemonth and conditions lapsed back again to something like their old cruel standard.

It is impossible to know what these conditions were and at the same time condemn the authors, as many did, for describing the turmoil of affairs which existed merely in their imaginative minds. One has only to read the great speeches of Cobden delivered in the House of Commons and in the country to find all the material he needs on the severity of the distress in England itself. Any reasonable person will be convinced that Marx and Engels did not exaggerate the gravity of the industrial crises.

England, however, was very little affected by the revolution of 1848. The Chartists made a demonstration in February and were determined to carry a petition to Westminster containing the famous six points, two of which were manhood suffrage and annual Parliaments. But this came to nothing,

for special constables were called out and the petition was sent to the House of Commons in a cab.

Let us grant, then, that Marx and Engels had sufficient political and industrial reasons for calling a revolt. In every important State in Europe after Waterloo there were to be found men as earnest as Marx and Engels crying for reform; some of them, indeed, went much further and aided the revolutionary movements. A writer in *The Times* (London), December 31, 1947, reminds us that de Tocqueville, in the French Chamber, in January, 1848, asked: "Can you at this very moment count upon to-morrow? Have you the smallest idea of what a year, a month, even a day may bring forth?"¹ The author of "Democracy in America" was no firebrand, but his words are fraught with warning. He knew the time had come when something must break or the people sink lower in their distress. The penury of great masses of the workers could no longer be endured, and those who rose against the evils of the time imagined that the overthrow of the governments in favor of a system of Communism was the only change that could be effective. This explains why the Manifesto began with these sentences:

A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre; Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies. . . .

Communism is already acknowledged by all European Powers to be itself a Power.²

It is not easy for the student of today to grasp the significance of this astonishing declaration; therefore, it is necessary to present a picture of what actually took place in Europe at the time. I cannot describe, within the compass of an article,

¹ "A Hundred Years Ago," p. 5.

² The edition of the *Communist Manifesto* used for this article is the authorized English translation, edited and annotated by Frederick Engels, published in Chicago by Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1888. Preface, p. 3.

the principal events of 1848 in a briefer way than has been done by *The Times* (London) writer in the article referred to above:

. . . On January 2 Italian patriots, rising against Austrian misgovernment in Lombardy, had given the signal for the general uprush of liberal and nationalist sentiment which consumed Europe for more than a year.

The heads of the most respected royal houses in Europe fled before the censures of popularly elected diets and students' unions. The King of Prussia was to be seen marching through the streets of Berlin with the German tricolor flying above his head, dutifully repeating the slogans of revolution to open-air meetings of undergraduates and working-men. Before the year was out a free Press had been established in the Papal States, and the Pope had appointed a lay administration. Metternich, the mainstay of the European order since 1815, joined Louis-Philippe as a refugee in England in the spring.

Everywhere the revolution followed the same lines. Petitions were succeeded by riots, riots by official capitulation, official capitulation by the election of Constituent Assemblies to define the Rights of Man and establish perfection. Sovereignty passed from landed aristocracies, field-marsals, priests and secret police to poets, pamphleteers and scholars. To liberals it seemed like the unconditional surrender of power and privilege to intelligence; to conservatives like the beginning of an anarchy which would not end until society had been destroyed.³

Failure of the Revolution in 1848

LET US NOW EXAMINE some of the salient points in the Manifesto and try to understand why forty years later, shortly after the death of Marx, Frederick Engels, referring to the Paris Commune of 1848, said that it had proved "that the working-class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes."⁴ This statement was incorporated in the preface written by Marx and Engels in 1872 for the German edition. There are many other reasons why the revolution of that year, when the Manifesto was issued, failed. The chief one was that Marx

³ *Loc. cit.*

⁴ Preface, p. 9.

and Engels were neither workers nor politicians, and they entirely miscalculated the fitness of the proletarians for their work at the barricades and also for conducting a system of order that was essential for the inauguration of the new era. They were right about the industrial conditions that existed, but they were wrong about the means of transference from the old order to the new.

Moreover, the terminology that they used had been selected arbitrarily to serve the purpose of the propaganda of a class struggle. To show that this was so, it is only necessary to take their two all-inclusive terms: "bourgeois" and "proletarians" and quote their own definitions of them. In a footnote we are told:

By bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern Capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage-labor. By proletariat, the class of modern wage-laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labor-power in order to live.⁵

The terms designating the two classes were so foreign to the minds of capitalists, risen from the ranks, and so strange to the ears of the laborers, in or out of work, that when they became current political gossip they suffered from many witty quips and not a few bawdy jokes.

It did not take long after the Manifesto was circulated, even among trade unionists of the time, for men in small businesses to ridicule the notion that they were oppressors even of the one or two apprentices they employed. And as for being a party of one class struggling against another, such a matter had never entered into their minds. Indeed, so far as Europe was concerned, the small business man had a far better understanding of economic law than the authors of the Manifesto had.

In England there was taking place a change so vital in

⁵ *Ibid.*, footnote, p. 12.

the affairs of her people that it was not to be wondered why the appeal of the Manifesto fell flat. The Corn Laws had been abolished and were followed by successive budgets remitting duties that fell heavily upon the working classes. The purchasing power of the shilling rose, and long before Engels wrote his new preface to the Manifesto, the props had been knocked from under many of the ideas its authors held. The amazing leap forward that Great Britain made during the sixties and seventies (in spite of three severe trade depressions) indicated clearly to the working classes that taxation was a fine upon effort and that it was responsible for much of the penury of the artisans and the dislocation of trade and commerce.

But evil conditions were not abolished. The consequences of land monopoly were evident everywhere. Nevertheless, the improvement that was made was so patent to everybody that Tory and Liberal governments vied with each other in offering further and far greater reforms. Indeed, the change was so far-reaching that in 1867 the Tory party dished the Whigs and extended the franchise. Later, in the eighties, the agricultural laborer was admitted to the electorate.

The long, arduous fight for factory reform at length brought about beneficent changes. The formation of the co-operative societies of the workers was a development that had never been foreseen by Marx and Engels, and the success of these ventures would have been hard for them to explain. Whether the executives of the Wholesale Co-operative were to be classified as bourgeois capitalists and the shareholders who drew their dividends as proletarians, no one could say.

The story of the rise of the co-operative societies is a signal instance of what the so-called proletarians can do once they determine to better themselves. Alice Stopford Green, in the Epilogue to her husband's great work, "A Short History

of the English People," gives a brief sketch of the success of this venture that was not begun by bourgeois capitalists:

. . . The Co-operative Wholesale Society, originated by a little group of artisans who met in Manchester over a "sixpenny tea," expanded during the next fifty years into a commercial enterprise exceeding any effort of private capitalism in its continuous success. Beginning with 24,000 members, it was in nine years serving 100,000 families; had started its own banking department which has now an annual turnover of nearly £20,000,000, and opened a boot factory with a present annual manufacture of nearly £8,000,000. It now manages five of the largest flour mills, and one of the largest tobacco factories; owns agricultural land in England and tea plantations in Ceylon: and is said to buy goods—and this for cash—at the rate of something like a thousand pounds in every minute of the working year. A scheme to protect the savings of the poor was inaugurated by Gladstone in the Post-Office Savings Banks, in which a fifth of the whole population now invest their economies: he also made it for the first time possible for the working-classes to acquire small annuities without risk of fraud or bankruptcy.⁶

This achievement could not have been realized if it had not been for the system of free trade which was ridiculed by Marx. Without a revolution, during the sixties and seventies, vast numbers of the British working people solved many of the problems that had distressed their forefathers. Of course everything had to be wrested from government, but the granting of the franchise in those days made the political powers recognize many of the important claims of the electorate, and all this was done by the so-called proletarians with no assistance from the Communists.

The Manifesto is sheer assertion from beginning to end—mere statement made by men who were far removed from the people they would liberate from the toils of the capitalist. The British working men had proved by the time Engels wrote his new preface in 1888 that there was quite another way of solving economic and political problems than by

⁶ *Op. cit.*, New York, American Book Company, 1916; p. 868.

raising barricades and overthrowing governments. It is amazing to think that the great experiment taking place under Engels' eyes did not indicate clearly to him that the Manifesto could be of no avail in Great Britain or in the United States. Yet, there are today such people as Harold Laski who asserts that "The Communist Manifesto still remains the most inspiring and up to date Socialist document."

The Communist Concept of Property

THE REVOLUTION OF 1917 in Russia was the occasion for a revival of the doctrine in Central Europe. Since the time of Lenin's success Communist societies have sprung up all over the world, and today there is not a State in Europe that is not seriously affected by the growth of the movement. Therefore, those who study the Manifesto at this time read into it entirely new matter with which it did not deal. Take, for example, the following:

The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically the most advanced and resolute section of the working class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have 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.⁷

This claim was never substantiated, and the absurdity of it should have been patent to Engels. Indeed, within a year it was shown conclusively that the revolt had failed. There was not a single leader in "the line of march" who reached the enemy's trenches with the slightest chance of success.

In a way it is amusing to notice in the Manifesto the many instances of circumlocution, a consciousness, as it were, of uncertainty about the terms used and the intentions of its advocates. The following is an example:

⁷ *Communist Manifesto*, p. 30.

The distinguishing feature of Communism is not the abolition of property generally, but the abolition of bourgeois property. . . .⁸

No Communist with whom I have debated the question has ever been able to state why two kinds of property should be differentiated. It may be that Marx and Engels realized when they reached this part of their work that there were possible adherents to the cause who were in small businesses and that it would have been detrimental to the movement to abolish the private property owned by these people. But they did not succeed in showing where the dividing line should be drawn. The great trouble was that they had no economic notion of what property is.

Assuredly it was difficult for them to prove that a man with a basket full of tools was *not* a capitalist and that a man with a factory full of tools *was* one! But they had no clear idea of what capital is. The nearest they could get to it was the industrial power of a factory owner to exploit the worker in an overstocked labor market.

The rest of the paragraph quoted above is as follows:

. . . But modern bourgeois private property is the final and most complete expression of the system of producing and appropriating products, that is based on class antagonism, on the exploitation of the many by the few.

In this sense, the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property.⁹

So what they grant to the small man in the first part of the statement, they repudiate later on, unless of course, there are *two* entirely different kinds of private property.

It was not until many years later (1867), when the first volume of *Das Kapital* was published, that Marx and Engels realized the true cause of an overstocked labor market, in which the unemployed competed against one another for jobs, and that this condition existed because the laborer had

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

no alternative: he was a landless man. He had been driven from the soil.

There never was such an extraordinary economic rigmarole and such a confusion of ideas. "But does wage-labor *create any property for the laborer?* Not a bit. It creates capital, i.e., *that kind of property which exploits wage-labor. . .*"¹⁰ (italics mine). The authors did not realize that capital is *produced* and *not created*.

The sweeping denial in this quotation that wage-labor does not "create" (produce) any property for itself was disproved every day in the week, even at the time when the Manifesto was written. The Communist lecturer was often asked how working men could begin as small employers and afterwards enter the ranks of the "bourgeoisie" and become "capitalists," if they had no property. Surely most of the hated factory owners started from very small beginnings and were possessors of some property gained by their own exertions.

These were points raised in many debates in the early years of the controversy, before Fabianism and Socialism were discussed on political platforms. However, when the Labor movement in England veered in the direction of Socialism, the political platforms of England rang with challenge and opposition, particularly in the six years preceding the first World War. And it was during these campaigns that the hollowness of the *Communist Manifesto* was thoroughly exposed.

One of the principal passages from the Manifesto which suffered severely in debate is a curious example of the muddle-headedness of Marx and Engels:

To be a capitalist, is to have not only a purely personal, but a social status in production. Capital is a collective product, and only by the united action of many members, nay, in the last resort, only by the united action of all members of society, can it be set in motion.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Capital is therefore not a personal, it is a social power.

When, therefore, capital is converted into common property, into the property of all members of society, personal property is not thereby transformed into social property. It is only the social character of the property that is changed. It loses its class-character.¹¹

I have known occasions when at question time the above has been read to Socialists with the demand that it should be explained in terms the audience could understand. And I never heard of any Socialist attempting to explain it. Why? Because the audience knew better than the speaker what capital is. Any plumber or carpenter in the audience knew that the tools he carried in his bag were capital and that he owned them. His social status was nil. Ask him if he regarded his capital as a social power; he would laugh.

But the greatest ridicule was poured upon the idea of the class character of capital. I remember a meeting in Yorkshire, in a spinning and weaving town where there was a large mill as well as several small individual and co-operative enterprises. At a meeting, the proprietor of the mill, a rich man, asked a Socialist lecturer to define his social status in production. This the lecturer failed to do, saying only that he employed labor. When the lecturer was asked into which class the employers in a small co-operative factory would fall, for a wonder he saw the absurdity of the position he had taken and laughed as heartily as anyone in the audience.

Abolition of the Family and Other Proposed Communist Reforms
FURTHER ON WE READ about the proposals for the abolition of the family, and this is the way the case is presented:

On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution.¹²

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

This was resented fiercely, and several of the men with whom I debated the question of Socialism versus Individualism told me that they did not agree with the statement and that it did an infinite amount of harm to the cause of Socialism. But the above-quoted sweeping denunciation is mild compared with the following:

Our bourgeois, not content with having the wives and daughters of their proletarians at their disposal, not to speak of common prostitutes, take the greatest pleasure in seducing each others' wives.

Bourgeois marriage is in reality a system of wives in common and thus, at the most, what the Communists might possibly be reproached with, is that they desire to introduce, in substitution for a hypocritically concealed, an openly legalized community of women. For the rest, it is self-evident, that the abolition of the present system of production must bring with it the abolition of the community of women springing from that system, i.e., of prostitution both public and private.¹³

A comprehensive program was drawn up by the authors and, strangely enough, it contained several reforms advocated by the old Radicals. It is admitted in the Manifesto that the measures will be different in different countries, but "in the most advanced countries the following will be pretty generally applicable":

1. Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes.
2. A heavy progressive or graduated income tax.
3. Abolition of all right of inheritance.
4. Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels.
5. Centralization of credit in the hands of the State, by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly.
6. Centralization of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State.
7. Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State; the bringing into cultivation of waste lands, and the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

8. Equal liability of all to labor. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.

9. Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country, by a more equable distribution of population over the country.

10. Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children's factory labor in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production, etc., etc.¹⁴

This program was shelved for nearly seventy years, and when the time came to give it a trial, Lenin was in command and found difficulty enough in setting up a Socialist State. The experience of the past thirty years is that the Russian bureaucracy under Stalin has not brought about the "utopia" that Marx and Engels envisioned. But one thing is most noticeable in this experiment and it is that the proletariat still remains a proletariat. If it differs in any respect from the conditions prevalent in Europe at the time the Manifesto was issued, it is in the direction of solving the problem of an abundant labor market by forcible means, by a system of tyranny far more cruel than that which prevailed in the middle of the last century. What would Marx and Engels have thought of Siberian labor camps? It is true that the Manifesto calls for an "*industrial army*", but no one would imagine that its authors dreamed for a moment of such a one as is under the command of Stalin today.

Nearly three years ago some of the ideas expressed in the Manifesto were put to trial by the Socialists in England who had won the general election with commanding majorities. The Bank of England, the railways, and the mines have been nationalized. But so far the proletariat have not begun to reap the promised rewards. It may be claimed that they are better off than they were, but in this highly experimental stage criticism should be withheld because there has not been

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-2.

sufficient time for the program of the government to be thoroughly tested. However, the enormous destruction of the last war and its costliness are factors that militate against the best intentions of the government; the loss of markets and the severe competition to be expected in the future from various parts of the empire are matters of foreboding at present. Still, it is not to be expected that a British Socialist Government will attempt to put the full program of the Manifesto into operation. It is not to be imagined that the people there will lightly submit to such a system as that over which Stalin reigns supreme.

I do not know to what extent the Manifesto is read by Socialists today. The clamor and the noise that are made about Communism are sufficient to impress one with the idea that the vast majority of people are busy studying the document and wondering when the next capitalist State will be overthrown. Day by day our newspapers devote columns to the question, but no one I meet seems to know what it is all about. None of my acquaintances indicates to me that he has read the Manifesto, and yet I hear Communism referred to week after week.

Perhaps the time has come when those who fear that this threat may become a political cataclysm should read this peculiar hodge-podge turned out by Marx and Engels and discuss its proposals and conceptions in the open.

So far I have not seen any of the newspapers that devote so much space to it supplying us with an analytical criticism of the document. There is no debate in our journals on this question. What does this mean? Apathy and indifference, or disinclination to study the question? One would think that such a menace would force people to gather information of what it means and what its intentions are. There seems to be no public opinion about the matter and, although there

have been investigations in Congress of people who allegedly belong to the Communist movement, nothing has happened, with the exception of some few who have been dismissed by their employers.

It is altogether a singular situation, and I doubt very much whether the investigation committee and the people who were called before it have the faintest conception of what Communism really is in practice, much less what it is in theory.

In the preface written to the German edition of 1872 the authors stated: "The Manifesto has become a historical document which we have no longer any right to alter." Few people take the trouble to understand what was meant by this confession. The fact was that such extraordinary changes had taken place in the principal States of Europe that the Manifesto was antiquated and no longer effective as a program for the relief of the proletariat and the overthrow of capitalism.

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