Review Essay

THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO AT 150

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We sometimes think, read, or are told about the "educated" or "informed" public. Those seldom-defined terms typically refer to well-educated people who “keep up with things,” to those who, among other things, read high-quality news sources, the best newspapers and magazines. That well-informed public might regularly read the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, or the Chicago Tribune, the nation’s largest circulation “prestige” dailies. Busy persons might depend on the Sunday edition of one of the latter four, or they might make do with one of the leading newsmagazines, Time, Newsweek, or U.S. News & World Report. There are, of course, many other options and combinations are always possible.

Those quality publications monitor the world’s “events,” select among the thousands of reports received, and pass on to their readers those judged most important. They also provide in-depth reports on developments in literature and culture, in the natural and social sciences, and on those in history. Some of these reports might be termed stocktaking. They provide overviews, summaries telling where we have been, where we have arrived, or, another option, how evidence, interpretations, or conclusions have changed.

Because of their high visibility, because they are “out front,” we tend to think of reporters and writers in this connection. But in many ways editors are the pivotal decision-makers. The wire editor, for example, reviews a welter of incoming material and makes the key decisions, throwing most of it in the wastebasket. Other material, that was either solicited or submitted, is also subject to editors’ “gatekeeping” judgments, the choices here being acceptance, publication with cuts, requests (or demands) for revision, or rejection. The “informed reader,” obviously, will not know or be able to judge the adequacy of those many pre-publication decisions. As for the published material, most informed readers must either accept those depictions of obscure subject matters “on faith” or, a next best thing, take an agnostic position.

An instructive case study of “knowledge” transmitted through quality news sources appeared in 1998. The occasion was the 150th anniversary of the publication of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ most famous work, The Communist Manifesto. Many publishers and editors saw this as an occasion for a retrospective glance, for a review of the authors' predictions over some five generations of modern experience.

The first of many commentaries appeared in The New Yorker (“The Next Thinker: The Return of Karl Marx,” 20-27 October 1997, pp. 248-259). The author, John Cassidy, a staff member, reported a discussion with an old friend, an unnamed source, now working for a Wall Street investment bank. Much to his surprise, the friend announced his conviction that “Marx was right.” That conclusion was based on a handful of quotations from the Manifesto, ones that, presumably showing unique insight, anticipated subsequent developments. Marx and Engels wrote that the need for new markets “chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe.” This meant that all “old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed.” These statements, it was claimed, anticipated present-day globalization. Cassidy’s final
comment is that Marx's "books will be worth reading as long as capitalism endures."

The New York Times Book Review gave an entire page to the subject, a contribution by Steven Marcus entitled "Marx's Masterpiece at 150" (26 April 1998, p. 39). Apart from one sentence, it is a work of unrestrained celebration. In unusually vapid prose, Marcus reported that the Manifesto "was and is a work of immense, autonomous historical importance... [which] continues to yield itself to our readings in the new light that its enduring insights into social existence generate." It "emerges ever more distinctly as an unsurpassed dramatic representation, diagnosis and prophetic array of visionary judgments on the modern world.... The detonating power and conceptual fullness of [its] utterances constitute a species of dramatic performance... a singular kind of action writing... [that] possess a structural complexity and a denseness of thematic play...." Its "trains of metaphoric figures and images are part of the dense local entwinements that constitute the microstructure of [its] linguistic fabric and argument. The macrostructure is equally complex and tightly interwoven."

Two-thirds of the way through, Marcus, in a parallel to Cassidy's procedure, signals an important prediction. Nothing, he writes, is more "striking and pertinent" than Marx and Engel's "vision of capitalism's triumphant globalization: 'Modern industry has established the world market, for which the discovery of America paved the way.'" Several other "achievements" are their recognition of "steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, [and] the canalization of rivers."

The problem, for both authors, is that those statements do not provide unique prescient insights. For more than two centuries prior to this "vision," Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, and English trading companies had been pushing their efforts outward to the antipodes. Two centuries before the Manifesto the Dutch East India Company was a giant multinational firm employing 50,000 sailors. And seven decades before the Manifesto Adam Smith published The Wealth of Nations, a famous book advocating among other things worldwide free trade. Any alert commentator reporting on European affairs in the 1840s would have pointed to the steam engines, railways, and canals. Cassidy and Marcus are crediting the two nineteenth-century late-comers for their recognition of that which was patently obvious. Of all the hypotheses contained in the Manifesto, those chosen for celebration are best described as commonplace.

Only in a brief final paragraph does Marcus touch on the authors' fundamental failure of prediction: "There is much of importance the Manifesto did not get right: the revolution it hailed was not successful; the proletariat did not become the gravediggers of the bourgeoisie; the ever-deeper pauperization of the working class did not occur. Undaunted, Marcus announces that the Manifesto "got certain things right as no other work of its time, or any other time." It "remains a classic expression of the society... whose doom it prematurely announced."


A second New York Times commentary touched on the new sybarites' edition along with several other related works, this by Paul Lewis, "Marx's Stock Resurges on a 150-Year Tip," (27 June 1998). Lewis opened with the statement that "Karl Marx may have been right after all." He touched on the "inevitable globalization" theme and proceeded to a review of the authors' central predictions. Of the latter, he writes: "None of that occurred." Touching on subsequent practice, a subject both Cassidy and Marcus overlooked, Lewis pointed to another failed prediction. Rather than "withering away," the Soviet state became "a monstrous instrument of oppression." Lewis provided a useful balanced summary of the pros and cons, one of the best of the season.

The comments in conservative sources, not surprisingly, were generally negative. The Wall Street Journal, the nation's largest circulation daily, offered a commentary by Roger Scruton entitled "May Day Revisited—The Proletariat is Passe, but the Revolution Lives on in the Culture," (1 May 1998). "The theory of history and society put forward by