

SPECTRES OF CAPITALISM

by SAMIR AMIN

translated from the French by SHANE HENRY MAGE

For the last century and a half, the spectre of communism has been haunting the world. Like any other spectre it can never be suppressed once and for all, even though it often happens that those fearing its menace are able, for a while, to get it out of their minds. And at each of those times they repeat the same orgiastic spectacle of gluttons falling over each other to grab even more riches, to gorge themselves on even more extra helpings from the table, and to take whatever drugs they hope will relieve their indigestion. They all repeat in chorus the same catch-phrases: "Marx is dead," "History has reached the end of its voyage, and nothing will ever again change," "Here we are and here we stay for evermore!" Some really believe that their dream world will last to all eternity. Others, troubled despite everything by a slight inquietude, look around themselves and murmur, "We really have to do *something* for everyone we keep away from our party: perhaps we should hand out some scraps from our feast to those poor souls." Meanwhile, among the innumerable victims there are those who cry over their fate, those who take refuge in ever-repeated tales of their glorious struggles in the past but who understand nothing of the causes for their recent defeats, and those who resign themselves to

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their condition and think, "God is with our enemies, there is nothing to do but hope for a softening of their hearts while we huddle at the fence over which they toss their leavings." But there are also some who calmly call for a meeting of those who can analyze the new situation, take the measure of the strengths and weaknesses of both camps, understand the challenges confronting their peoples, and in this way prepare for tomorrow's struggles and victories.

One hundred fifty years after the *Communist Manifesto* was put forth, we are once again in one of those moments when the gluttons hold their orgy. But this momentary triumph of unrestrained capital is not accompanied by a brilliant new expansive surge for capitalism but by the deepening of its crisis! Thus, the boundless appetite of capital, given full scope by the momentary weakening of its adversary class, in fact shows explosively the absurd irrationality of this system. The inequality that it promotes undermines its possibilities for expansion. It expands consumption in a distorted manner by favoring wholesale waste by the rich, but this in no way compensates for the poverty to which it condemns the majority of workers and peoples, who become ever less successfully integrated into its system of exploitation. So capitalism, by its very logic, reduces them to a marginal status and settles for mere crisis management, which it can do just as long as the social power of its adversaries is not reconstituted. This paradoxical victory of capital giving rise to its prolonged crisis is only apparent if we cool off by reading the *Communist Manifesto* and recall to our memory the plain reason for this: capitalism is incapable of overcoming its fundamental contradictions.

To destroy the conquests of the working classes, to dismantle the systems of social security and employment protection, to return to poverty wages, to bring certain of the peripheral countries back to their outmoded status as providers of raw materials while limiting the opportunities of those who have become relatively industrialized by imposing the status of subcontractor on their productive systems, and to speed up the squandering of the resources of the planet: such is the program of the currently dominant forces. This permanently reactionary utopia expresses the deepest desire of the gluttons whose arrogant self-affirmation bursts out all over at historical moments like our present one.

The critique of current intellectual fashions that I put forth in this contribution to the sesquicentennial of the *Communist Manifesto* will accentuate the nullity of this reactionary utopia.

In the first place, its scientific nullity, nullity of this "pure economics" which claims for itself the title "neoclassical," even though it stands at the opposite pole from the method of classical economics and which applies itself laboriously to the task of proving what can never be proved: that markets are self-regulating in a way that produces a natural, general equilibrium which is the best possible for society. Marx, free from the morbid preoccupation of bourgeois ideologies (which is to legitimize capitalist society through declaring it definitively unsurpassable, the End of History) reminds us simply that to believe in a natural equilibrium governing society is to believe in something absurd, which can be sought only in blind alleys. In place of this false question Marx poses the real task, which is to analyze the contradictions of the system, those which define its historical limits. A rereading of the *Manifesto*, in today's world, makes apparent immediately and convincingly the superiority of Marx's century-and-a-half-old analysis. It remains closer to today's reality than all the neoliberal effusions of an economics that goes whichever way the wind blows. And that empty economics has its pale complement in the enfeebled social and philosophical theses of "postmodernism," which teach us to be happy and to cope with the system on a day-to-day basis, while closing our eyes to the ever more gigantic catastrophes which it is cooking up for us. Postmodernism thus legitimizes, in its own way, the manipulative practices required of political managers for whom democracy must be reduced to the status of a "low intensity" activity even as it treats the attachment of a society to its own identity as something neurotic, empty, and impotent.

This contribution is likewise offered in the hope that, starting from this analysis of the weaknesses of our apparently triumphant enemy, we will size up what is objectively required for a humanist answer to the challenge. This answer, today, takes on an even more pressing necessity than it did one hundred fifty years ago. The socialization of labor, on an immeasurably greater scale than in 1848, has put on the agenda the withering away of the law of value. Capitalism's short-run rationality, by its incompetence to put forward acceptable means for managing the future of our planet, is now producing destructive effects

unimaginable a century and a half ago. Since the time of the *Manifesto*, polarization on a world scale has taken on a scope unparalleled in all previous history. This forces us, in looking to reconcile the universalist dimension of the human enterprise with respect for the diversity of the peoples undertaking that enterprise, to do so by means surpassing those that bourgeois thought has been able to conceive and by methods that go outside the logic that sets what bourgeois thought accepts as practical.

These questions, old ones, though rephrased by the challenges posed by their historical development, ask that we do not reread the *Manifesto* as if it were a sacred (which to me means dead, even embalmed) text. Rather, the spirit of this text, which was so far ahead of its time that whole paragraphs of it can be quoted as if written yesterday, must be an invitation to us to continue its still unfinished task.

History has proven that capitalism, like all social systems, is able at each stage of its expansion to overcome its own permanent contradictions, but not without worsening the violence with which they will be experienced by succeeding generations. This is not at all foreign to the Marxian spirit, which I express in the proposition that the human enterprise remains underdetermined, that it is not foreclosed by some necessity that is tied to the development of either the productive forces or any other metasocial force. More than ever humanity is confronted with two choices: to let itself be led by capitalism's unfolding logic to a fate of collective suicide or, on the contrary, to give birth to the enormous human possibilities carried by that world-haunting spectre of communism.