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The Spectre Is Still Roaming Around!

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An introduction to the 150th anniversary edition of *The Communist Manifesto*

(**excerpts**): [1].[of 4].[of 10].[**Chapter 01**]:

The first, automatic reaction of today's enlightened liberal reader to **The Communist Manifesto** is: isn't the text simply *wrong* on so many empirical accounts, with regard to the picture it gives of the social situation, as well as with regard to the revolutionary perspective it sustains and propagates? Was there ever a political manifesto that was more clearly falsified by subsequent historical reality? Isn't **The Communist Manifesto**, at best, an exaggerated extrapolation of certain tendencies discernible in the 19th century?

So let us approach **The Communist Manifesto** from the opposite end: where do we live today, in our global "post..." (postmodern, postindustrial) society? The slogan that is imposing itself more and more is that of "globalization": the brutal imposition of a unified world market that threatens all local ethnic traditions, including the very form of Nation-State. And, in this situation, is not the description in *The Manifesto* of the social impact of the bourgeoisie more actual than ever? -

"The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new -formed ones become antiquated before they can

ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature."

Is this not, more than ever, our reality today? Think about Ericsson phones which are no longer Swedish, about Toyota cars manufactured 60% in the USA, about Hollywood culture that pervades the remotest parts of the globe... Yes, this is our reality - on condition that we do not forget to supplement this image from the manifesto with its inherent dialectical opposite, the "spiritualization" of the very material process of production. That is to say, on the one hand, capitalism entails the radical secularization of social life - it mercilessly tears apart all aura of authentic nobility, sacredness, honour, etc.:

"It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom - Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation."

However, the fundamental lesson of the "critique of political economy" elaborated by the mature Marx in the years after *The Manifesto* is that this reduction of all heavenly chimeras to the brutal economic reality generates a spectrality of its own. When Marx describes the mad self-enhancing circulation of capital, whose solipsistic path of self-fecundation reaches its apogee in today's meta-reflexive speculations on futures, it is far too simplistic to claim that the spectre of this self-engendering monster that pursues its path disregarding any human or environmental concern is an ideological abstraction, and that one should never forget that, behind this abstraction, there are real people and natural objects on whose productive

capacities and resources the capital's circulation is based and on which it feeds like a gigantic parasite. The problem is that this "abstraction" is not only in our (financial speculator's) misperception of social reality, but that it is "real" in the precise sense of determining the structure of the very material social processes: the fate of whole strata of the population and sometimes of whole countries can be decided by the "solipsistic" speculative dance of Capital, which pursues its goal of profitability in a blessed indifference to how its movement will affect social reality. Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than the direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their "evil" intentions, but is purely "objective", systemic, anonymous. Here we should recall Etienne Balibar who distinguishes two opposite but complementary modes of excessive violence in today's world 3: the "ultra-objective" ("structural") violence that is inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism (the "automatic" creation of excluded and dispensable individuals, from the homeless to the unemployed), and the "ultra-subjective" violence of newly emerging ethnic and/or religious (in short: racist) "fundamentalisms" - this second "excessive" and "groundless" violence is just a counterpart to the first violence.

The fact of this "anonymous" violence also allows us to make a more general point about anti-Communism. The pleasure provided by anti-Communist reasoning was that Communism made it so easy to play the game of finding the culprit, blaming the Party, Stalin, Lenin, ultimately Marx himself, for the millions of dead, for terror and gulag, while in capitalism, there is nobody on whom one can pin guilt or responsibility, things just happened that way, through anonymous mechanisms, although capitalism has been no less destructive in terms of human and environmental costs, destroying aboriginal cultures... In short, the difference between capitalism and Communism is that Communism was perceived as an Idea which then failed in its realization, while capitalism functioned "spontaneously". There is no *Capitalist Manifesto*.

(see <http://www.arkzin.com/munist/ziz1e.htm>
for chapters 3, 4, and 10)