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Reviews

# The book about the book

- Reviews section -

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**People collect all sorts of things, and I collect *The Communist Manifesto*.** This has garnered intellectual admiration from booksellers in Krakow and London, left me broke in Reykjavik, chased out of a store in Czechia, and made me friends with an old Stalinist lady in a mid-sized Albanian mountain village. It's not a boring hobby. "Everyone" who works in a bookstore knows which book I'm asking for, and almost as many have very strong opinions about the pamphlet Marx and Engels published in 1848. **The Communist Manifesto.** This has garnered intellectual admiration from booksellers in Krakow and London, left me broke in Reykjavik, chased out of a store in Czechia, and made me friends with an old Stalinist lady in a mid-sized Albanian mountain village. It's not a boring hobby. "Everyone" who works in a bookstore knows which book I'm asking for, and almost as many have very strong opinions about the pamphlet Marx and Engels published in 1848.

China Miéville has written a book about the book. The task of writing *A Spectre, Haunting: On the Communist Manifest* must have been both easy and difficult.

On one hand, there are so much juicy stuff, a wealth of fascinating content, fantastic quotes and controversial statements – all history is class struggle, we find ghosts but not fatherlands, workers with chains, abolish the family!, and so on and so forth – that this can hardly have been a boring book to write. On the other hand, *the Manifesto* is a sea of complexity. There are contradictions and tensions, we find proposals for concrete political reform and deep analyses, both condemnation and fascination with the enemy, great hopes for revolution and fantastic poetry – often on the same page. The boundaries between claims, predictions and admonitions can be razor-thin when Marx and Engels hammer away at the world they love to hate.

I think Miéville reads Marx and Engels exactly as they should be read: respectfully and humbly, but historically situated, un-dogmatic, and always critical. It's a pleasure to read *the Manifesto* with Miéville. He not only follow us through the text, but also discusses the book's form and its historical context, raises some old criticisms and finally discusses it in the light of today.

A real gem is the discussion of the manifesto's form. That is, *The Communist Manifesto* as a manifesto. This is not a (positivist) set of doctrines that can be tested here and now. A classic assertion from *the Manifesto* is, for example, that the bourgeoisie produces its own gravediggers, meaning that capitalism creates its own downfall. Well, says the critic, that did not happen, did it? (And adds: "there you go – the working class had more to lose than just their chains!".)

Nevertheless, it was right by Marx and Engels to proclaim the fall of capitalism. Not so different from an officer preparing for a battle. She can first explain to her troops what the terrain looks like. This can be (relatively) certain knowledge. But as the forces run/ride/drive out onto the battlefield, the officer convincingly shouts, "They will die and we will win!!!" This she can not know. But she says it anyway.

It may turn out to be true, but the important thing is that the chances of this becoming true increase if she says it. Along this track, we can read *the Manifesto* as a call to action. The socialist revolution is a hypothesis we must make true, and as long as capitalism exists, this is certainly possible.

Miéville, our guide, takes no shortcuts past complexity. *The Manifesto* can be read both as stating that the socialist revolution is a historical necessity ("gravediggers"), but also that class struggle can lead to the common ruin of all

contending classes. We read that "civilized nations" will bring the "barbarian" along into the future, but also that "the so-called civilization" itself is barbaric and violent.

*The Manifesto* is perhaps more than anything a critique of the bourgeoisie, but it also contains a truly deep fascination for – shall we say, a celebration of? – the same class (which has "accomplished wonders"). This was a problem even at the time the text was written, as the "radical bourgeoisie", for example, was truly reactionary during the 1848 uprisings, mere days and weeks after *the Manifesto* was published. Today, the greatest gift that this "progressive" bourgeoisie has provided us is a new geological epoch we do not want.

When we read *the Manifesto* against Marx's later works, we see some clear trends. For instance, Kevin Anderson's book *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* shows masterfully how Marx becomes increasingly less historically deterministic and Eurocentric with time, how he places more emphasis on racism, and opens up for possibilities for socialism even outside of the capitalist core.

Much of *the Manifesto's* insistence that socialism *necessarily* arises out of capitalism disappears. We can see a similar trend with crisis theory. Blinded by the political and industrial revolutions of the 1700s and early 1800s, which greatly influence *the Manifesto*, crises are seen as a revolutionary force. It is only later in the 1800s that Marx sees the crises more clearly for what they actually are: events that reproduce capitalism.

It is always a joy to read *the Manifesto*, and it only becomes more fun with Miéville's humor. As on the very first page of *the Manifesto*, where it is declared that communists should openly present their views and aims "in the face of the whole world". This, Miéville notes, "from a pamphlet of which 1,000 copies were initially printed by a small group of squabbling émigrés".

In order for this review of the book about the book not to be just a tribute, I will point out parts that could potentially been better. In discussions about the relevance of *the Manifesto* today, Miéville includes many current discussions about the world we live in. Personally, I think Miéville almost always hits the mark in terms of content. But since these discussions are fairly short, they can almost become superficial.

If one for example wants to discuss racism and patriarchy today, it is uncertain whether *the Manifesto* – and a book about *the Manifesto* – is really the best starting point. That being said, Miéville's discussion on class hatred bring something new and important. Whereas Marx and Engels balance between admiration and condemnation of the bourgeoisie, Miéville reject the idea that the bourgeoisie is "progressive". In the time of the climate crisis, all admiration must be put aside. For the sake of humanity, Miéville argues, we must hate harder than Marx and Engels did in *the Manifesto*.

Since *A Spectre, Haunting* contains the entire *Manifesto* as an appendix, the book goes straight into my little collection of manifestos. Aesthetically, *the Manifesto* is my favorite book in the Marxist library; it's such a literary masterpiece. Politically, I should probably be collecting *Capital* instead. But that shit would be too damn heavy to carry around.

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