



Re-reading the Communist Manifesto

What does it mean for us in the 21st century?

By Jeremy Cronin

Activist and author Jeremy Cronin is a long-standing member of the ANC and South African Communist Party. He was a Member of Parliament for 20 years, from 1999. He served in government as Deputy Minister of Transport and Deputy Minister of Public Works. He has published many articles and books as well as three volumes of poetry, the first one written while he was serving a seven-year prison sentence.

JEREMY CRONIN revisits the Communist Manifesto – he wrote the introduction to a new edition with Afrikaans and isiZulu translations that is being published by Jacana Media – to test its relevance to South Africa today. Never intended as a political blueprint, it nevertheless places our global crisis in the context of conflict and contestation predicted by Marx and Engels almost 200 years ago.

After the Bible and the Quran, the Communist Manifesto is the most widely published and translated text. Now, thanks to Jacana publishers, we have a new edition.

But is there anything to be learnt from (re)reading the Communist

Manifesto in 2022? As we stumble from the 2008 Great Recession, into a global pandemic, and now a NATO-provoked, Putin-led aggression in Ukraine, all in the shadow of threatening environmental collapse – what, if anything, might we learn from the Manifesto?

A century and three-quarters after its first publication it certainly shouldn't be read as immutable gospel. Marx and Engels themselves frequently insisted on both the relative integrity of their youthful endeavour and its open-ended, work in progress character.

Especially resonant today is the Manifesto's brief but lucid unpacking of the crisis-prone nature of capitalism. These crises, Marx and Engels argue, with their "periodical return" are not caused by external shocks. They are driven by the internal logic of capitalist accumulation itself. "Modern bourgeois society ... that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and exchange, is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells."

The only way in which these

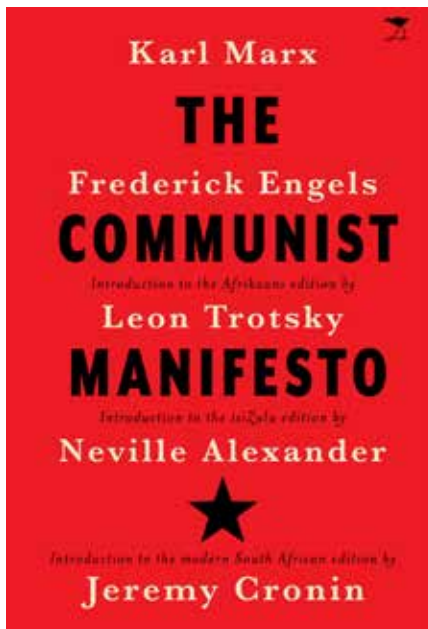
recurring crises can be overcome within a capitalist system is through the massive liquidation of productive capacity, with factory closures, bankruptcies, the destruction of jobs and livelihoods, "by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones. That is to say, by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented."

Anyone reading the Manifesto for the first time expecting a crude bourgeois bashing is likely to be surprised. There are passages that salute the heroic dynamism of an emergent capitalist class. "The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation."

In a prize-winning 1906 oration, the young Pixley ka Isaka Seme, future founder secretary-general of the ANC, echoed what on the face of it were similar views. "See the triumph of human genius today! Science ➤

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has searched out the deep things of nature ... spanned the sweeping rivers, tunnelled the longest mountain range – made the world a vast whispering gallery, and has brought foreign nations into one civilised family.”

Seme felt this first wave of capitalist globalisation in the late 19th century had by-passed the African continent. He called for an African renaissance. Seme was not wrong to celebrate the progressive potential of late 19th century capitalist globalisation, with its steamships, the telegraph and continental railways. Nor was he wrong to urge Africans to rise to the challenges.

But, for Seme, this wave of globalisation was essentially benign, evolutionary, technical progress. Anomalies, like the continued marginalisation of Africa, were supposedly the result of oversight. This outlook produced a politics of Westernising modernisation at home and of deputations to persuade a Western audience that Africa was not inherently backward after all.

From the mid-1990s, Thabo Mbeki began explicitly to reprise Seme’s lyrical vision of a new world. The 21st century would be “an African century”. Our continent was on the threshold of a renaissance. Dazzled, perhaps, by the seeming global acclaim for our mythical “rainbow nation”, and universal admiration for (and commodification of) Mandela the icon, there was a belief that soon abundant Marshall aid would pour into our country.

This meshed well with the emergent Third Way politics of former Western leaders Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and Gerhard Schroeder. It was the politics of a centre-left in the metropolises going rapidly rightwards, making its peace with a triumphant neo-liberalism. It declared we now lived in a post-communist, post-industrial, post-colonial world that had surpassed class struggle, in which, finally, we had the macro-economic tools to overcome capitalism’s boom and bust cycles. It was the end of history.

We were to be positioned henceforth as a global go-between, representing the South to the North, and preaching to the South the good governance gospel according to the World Bank, IMF and Goldman Sachs.

Seme’s early- and Mbeki’s late-20th century visionary ambitions were each soon to be dashed, as Marx and Engels had in effect foretold in the Manifesto way back in 1848. A mere eight years after Seme’s inspiring oration, the world was plunged into a gruesome, inter-imperialist conflict in the bloody trenches of World War 1.

The early hopes of our 1994 democratic breakthrough have also largely been disappointed. Unsustainable levels of unemployment, persistent racialised inequality amidst islands of obscene wealth, a raging war against women’s bodies, are testament to a society in deep distress.

Our problems have certainly been compounded by a vastly miscreant Zuma presidency and its kleptocratic networks – but these are symptoms as much as causes. To better understand our challenges and their deeper systemic character, it is instructive to return to the Manifesto and the seminal line of inquiry it opened up.

Here for the first time both the progressive and the crisis-prone, self-destructive nature of capitalism are explored. Contradiction and crisis are hard-wired into its DNA, and directly linked to the very dynamism so one-sidedly admired by Seme. In the Manifesto capitalism’s crisis-prone nature is explained essentially as something that “in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity – the epidemic of overproduction”. It is a system capable of hugely impressive, productive advances – but driven not by social need but private profit. What cannot be sold for a profit is worthless to capital, regardless of social needs. Productive capacity (including human labour) that is no longer profitable for the expanded reproduction of capital is cast aside.

The deepening inequality produced by capitalism exacerbates the problem of overproduction. When a tiny 1% controls the majority of wealth, a demand crisis strikes the market. In later work, notably *Capital*, Marx explores other dimensions of the capitalist crisis, including the tendency of a declining rate of profit. Under these conditions, surplus that could be invested in production is diverted into huge speculative bubbles (“financialisation”) of the kind that underpinned the 2008 Great Recession.

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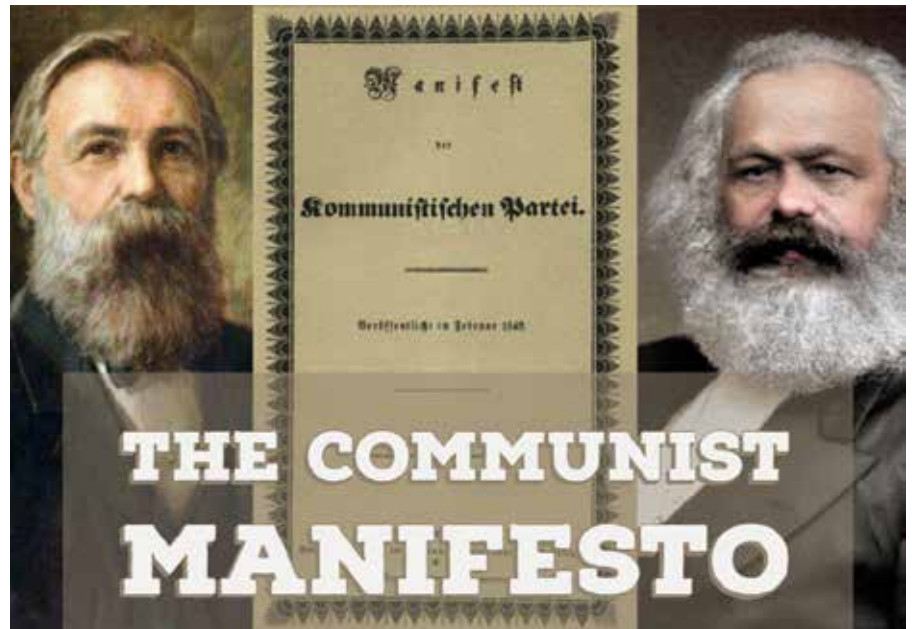
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But if Seme and Mbeki got it wrong, can the same not also be said of the Manifesto’s expectations of a proletarian revolution, however long-range those expectations were?

Capitalism, in contrast to what was once called “actually existing socialism”, has certainly proved more tenacious than the Manifesto would sometimes seem to suggest. Part of this resilience lies in its ability to avoid crises of capitalism becoming terminal crises for capitalism, off-loading their impact onto the environment, onto workers and middle strata, onto the global South.

However, as the Manifesto asserts, each of these recuperative manoeuvres is “paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, ... diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented.” In particular, the ongoing capitalist destruction of environmental sustainability, the very condition for human civilisation, raises the most urgent question of our times.

In the Manifesto there is a sobering reminder that victory is not certain. In the long history of class struggles, the clash of oppressor and oppressed might end “in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large”. But it might end “in



the common ruin of the contending classes.” As we hurtle towards irreversible planetary destruction, which is it to be? And if it is to be the former, a revolutionary re-set “of society at large”, how are we to get there?

In the second and concluding sections of the Manifesto politics enter the discussion – strategy and tactics; immediate aims and longer-term objectives; concrete analysis; political organisation; alliances; popular mobilisation. This is the terrain of practice. Here history is not on auto-pilot, but nor is it open-ended – there are predictable tendencies, but nothing is predetermined.

It would be wrong to read the Manifesto in search of some cut-and-paste, political blue-print for the present, a utopian model ready to be rolled out. The Manifesto is explicitly critical of any such utopian models. But there are intriguing practical political lessons for our times. Given a long history of left politics too often riven

with factional skirmishes, the Manifesto insists that communists “do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement.”

Touching presciently on other inherent negative tendencies in Left politics, the Manifesto argues neither for mere populist short-termism, nor for an all-or-nothing, abstentionist disdain for the daily struggles of working people. “The Communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of the movement.”

For Marx and Engels politics is not just “the art of the possible”. It is also an ever-enquiring science of the probable, and a passionate engagement with what is desirable – a world in which, finally, “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” **NA**