

Viewpoint

THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO: LESSONS FOR DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

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Abstract: With the break-up of the Soviet Union and collapse of communism in 1989, Marx is now untethered from the stigma of Stalinism and, with the crisis in global capitalism, is now very much in vogue. Two hundred years on from his birth, this article revisits Marx's most famous and influential work, *The Communist Manifesto* and argues that much of it continues to speak directly to the economic crisis which enveloped the world ten years ago; a crisis from which we are still at risk. The article goes on to consider the influence of Marx's dialectic materialism on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, something that some of the latter's adherents may find uncomfortable and prefer to forget. It ends by suggesting that the international development sector should apply a Marxist and Freirean analysis to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in determining their efficacy and prospects for success. Given the dominance of the SDGs in the international development policy landscape this question has assumed increasing importance.

Key words: Karl Marx; Paulo Freire; Development Education; International Development; The Communist Manifesto; Pedagogy of the Oppressed; Sustainable Development Goals; Global Financial Crisis; Economic Inequality.

Introduction

The great political economist, journalist, activist, brilliant pamphleteer, lifelong agitator for socialism and ground-breaking analyst of the trajectory of global capitalism, Karl Marx, was born two hundred years ago. His most famous work, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) written with his lifelong

comrade and collaborator Friedrich Engels, was published one hundred and seventy years ago, and together with his *magnum opus*, *Capital* [*Das Kapital*] (1867), has ensured that Marx is indelibly integrated into contemporary debate on the global economy as long as we have capitalism. In an introduction to the *Manifesto* in 1967, the revered historian A. J. P. Taylor described it ‘among the intellectual documents of the nineteenth century’ (7). Another towering historian, Eric Hobsbawm said that ‘*The Communist Manifesto* as political rhetoric has almost biblical force. In short, it’s impossible to deny its compelling power as literature’ (2011: 110).

Indeed, the *Manifesto* was adopted with religious zeal by the former Soviet Union and its satellites, together with other communist parties across the world, and for much of the last century, Marx became synonymous with Stalinist gulags and the worst excesses carried out in the name of ‘communism’. Yanis Varoufakis, in yet another introduction to the *Manifesto* published in 2018, suggested that the *Manifesto*’s legitimising authoritarianism is akin to blaming the ‘New Testament for the Spanish Inquisition’ (2018a: xix). However, he argues that Marx and Engels ‘kept a judicious silence over the impact their own analysis would have on the world they were analysing’ (ibid), adding, that they:

“failed to see that powerful, prescriptive texts have a tendency to procure disciples, believers – a priesthood even – and that this faithful might use the power bestowed upon them by the *Manifesto* to their own advantage” (ibid: xix-xx).

Hobsbawm, too, recognised that Marx:

“deliberately abstained from specific statements about the economics and economic institutions of socialism and said nothing about the concrete shape of communist society, except that it could not be constructed or programmed but would evolve out of a socialist society’ (2011: 8).

Into this vacuum stepped interpreters of Marx, often to disastrous effect in planned economies where the human cost of ‘communism’ in some cases exceeded those of the system they sought to challenge and supplant. As Varoufakis suggests: ‘I believe that Marx and Engels would have regretted not anticipating the *Manifesto*’s impact on the Communist Parties it foreshadowed’ (2018: xx). He argues that ‘Liberty, happiness, autonomy, individuality, spirituality, self-guided development are ideals that Marx and Engels valued above everything else’ (2018: xxvii).

With the break-up of the Soviet Union and collapse of communism in 1989, Marx is now untethered from the stigma of Stalinism and is being discovered by a new generation of young people born after the Cold War. It is also time for the *Manifesto* to be rediscovered by the international development and development education sectors as much of its content speaks directly to the causes of poverty between and within countries today. We should recall, too, the influence of Marx’s dialectic materialism on Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, something that some of his adherents may find uncomfortable and prefer to forget (Au, 2017: 171). This article considers the contemporary relevance of Marx and the *Manifesto* in particular, before briefly assessing the influence of Marx on Freirean pedagogy and, finally, suggesting that the international development sector needs to apply a Freirean and Marxist analysis to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in determining their efficacy and prospects for success.

Capitalism in crisis

Eric Hobsbawm argues that Marx remains ‘one of the intellectual presences of our age’ for two reasons. First, the collapse of the former Soviet Union has ‘liberated Marx from public identification with Leninism in theory and with the Leninist regimes in practice’ (2011: 5). And second, ‘because the globalised capitalist world that emerged in the 1990s was in crucial ways uncannily like the world anticipated by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*’ (ibid). 2018 represents another anniversary which has renewed our interest in Marx; it is a decade on from the largest economic crisis since the 1930s which required a staggering United States (US) government bank bailout

estimated at \$16.8 trillion (Collins, 2015). The bailout signalled to the banking sector that some institutions were too big to fail no matter what unscrupulous, illegal practices unravelled the economic system a decade ago. In assessing how things have changed since 2008, Varoufakis (2018b) argues that a combination of austerity and a public bailout of the banks has increased global debt by 40 percent since 2007. He argues that far from the risk of further crises being diminished, it has ‘been moved to the shadow banking system, which has grown from \$28 trillion in 2010 to \$45 trillion in 2018’ (ibid). Economist Ann Pettifor, too, argues that ‘business is better than usual for bankers now, largely backed by government guarantees and central bank largesse’ (Pettifor, 2018). She argues for a return of Keynesian economics: centrally regulated exchange rates and tighter regulations on the operations of corporations and banks (ibid).

There are worrying indicators of the social cost of austerity-driven welfare reform and government expenditure cuts which were implemented across Europe post-2008. Five years after the crisis, Amnesty International reported that:

“The financial crisis and austerity measures in many EU countries have affected various economic and social rights, including those ensuring access to social security, housing, health, education and food. The measures often disproportionately affect the poorest and most marginalised people” (2013).

Evidence of the impact of austerity provided by The Trussell Trust, which operates a foodbank network across the United Kingdom (UK), suggests that it is indeed the vulnerable who are being hit hardest by austerity and cuts to services. The Trust distributed 1.3 million three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis between April 2017 and March 2018, a 13 percent increase on 2017, with 484,026 of these supplies going to children (The Trussell Trust, 2018). The top four reasons given for referrals to foodbanks were low incomes, benefit delays, benefit changes and debt. Therefore, those dependent on welfare and working in low paid jobs were most vulnerable to

austerity-driven welfare cuts and wage freezes (ibid). In September 2018, the health union Unison announced it was distributing foodbank vouchers to health workers in two hospitals in Belfast who were ‘struggling to put food on the table’ (Fitzmaurice, 2018). Many of those who make recourse to foodbanks are the working poor because of the growing gap between stagnating wages and rising prices for food, utilities, rent and clothing. They are society’s most vulnerable and marginalised people; single parents, the disabled, the elderly and young people.

Hobsbawm summarises the current economic climate thus:

“Given the prominence of market fundamentalism it has generated extreme economic inequality within countries and between regions and brought back the element of catastrophe to the basic cyclical rhythm of the capitalist economy, including what became its most serious global crisis since the 1930s” (2011: 11-12).

When we add to this poisonous brew the rise of the extreme right (McCloskey, 2017) feeding off societal unrest and a popular disconnection with mainstream political life, it creates a fluid, volatile climate fertile for the erosion of human rights and greater authoritarianism. Foreseeing the emergence of global capital and the inequalities it would create are among the estimable qualities of *The Communist Manifesto*.

Marx is back

In 2008, Marx returned to the bestsellers list (Connolly, 2008) as proletariat and bourgeoisie alike sought to make sense of the global crisis that upended perceived certainties about capitalism ‘lifting all ships’ in a sea of prosperity. Among the perplexed observers of the crisis was Alan Greenspan, former chair of the US Federal Reserve, who said at the time, ‘I have found a flaw’ referring to his free market ideology, adding that, ‘I don’t know how significant or permanent it is. But I have been very distressed by that fact’ (Clark and Treanor, 2008). Greenspan’s ‘distress’ will have done little to mollify the anger and heartbreak of the more than 860,000 families in the US

who lost their homes in 2008 ‘as risky subprime mortgages proved unsustainable’ (Clark, 2009). Ironically, the casino-like capitalism that did for home-owners resulted in an alarming 32 percent increase in repossessions year on year in the gambling capital of Las Vegas; the worst rate in the US (ibid). By 2016, more than 500,000 people were homeless in the US, many of them living in official and unofficial tent cities (Taylor, 2016) from Seattle to Honolulu, creating images reminiscent of the Great Depression (Amadeo, 2018).

That Marx saw a lot of this coming in the middle of the nineteenth century while in his late twenties, is why the *Manifesto* continues to endure and inspire. He firmly established the relationship between the class system and the means of production arguing that ‘society as a whole is now more and more splitting into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat’ (1967: 80). This appears to be exactly what is happening in today’s socially and economically polarised world. Oxfam reported in 2016 that:

“The global inequality crisis is reaching new extremes. The richest 1% now have more wealth than the rest of the world combined. Power and privilege is being used to skew the economic system to increase the gap between the richest and the rest” (2016: 1).

The *Manifesto* said bourgeois society ‘has agglomerated population, centralized means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands’ (1967: 85) but even Marx may have been astonished at just how few with Oxfam reporting in 2017 that ‘just eight men own the same wealth as the poorest half of the world’ (1). But it was Marx’s prophetically accurate characterisation of capital’s global march that was core to the *Manifesto*’s analysis. Thus:

“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 connexions (sic everywhere” (ibid: 83).

It goes on to argue that ‘The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country’ (ibid). The rapid acceleration of globalisation post-1989 has sealed the *Manifesto*’s relationship with twenty-first century capitalism, particularly where it says that ‘the increase in the means of exchange and in commodities generally, gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry an impulse never before known’ (ibid: 80).

There is a particularly powerful section which anticipates climate change, the rise of multinational corporations, the surge in consumerism and the eradication of indigenous industry. It says that:

“All old established 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 where 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’ (ibid: 83-84).

Does the reference to new industry becoming a matter of ‘life and death’ go too far? Think about the Chinese workers in an Apple iPhone factory who have committed suicide by throwing themselves off buildings such are the cruel, sweatshop conditions in which they work (Fullerton, 2018). Think about the more than 1,000 textiles workers who perished in an eight story factory fire in Bangladesh in 2013 (BBC, 2013). Think, too, about the rupture to traditional agricultural lifestyles in areas threatened by climate change caused by the unsustainable consumption of natural resources such as oil and gas. The suicide of 60,000 farmers over a 30-year period in India, for

example, has been sourced to climate change and resultant stresses on agricultural production (Safi, 2017).

The *Manifesto* also foresaw the rise of urbanisation: ‘The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns’ (1967: 84); intellectual property rights (ibid); the commodification of labour (ibid: 87); and the social determination of education as a mirror of the controlling forces of the economy (ibid: 100). The danger of deregulated capital is powerfully invoked in one of the *Manifesto*’s most compelling sentences:

“Modern bourgeois society is with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells’ (ibid: 86).

Marx also famously captured how capitalism swept away the old feudal order and re-ordered social relations when he said: ‘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’ (ibid: 83).

Of course, the central premise of the *Manifesto* that the bourgeoisie would produce its own gravediggers (the proletariat) has not come to pass with most revolutions since 1848 resulting from the actions of what A J P Taylor calls ‘the down-and-outs of *lumpenproletariat*’ (ibid: 26). Marx and Engels recognised that parts of the *Manifesto* had already become dated when they wrote a preface to a new edition in 1872 (ibid: 33-34). 45 years later it helped inspire the Russian revolution of 1917 and ‘became the accepted creed or religion for countless millions of mankind’ and the slim pamphlet became a ‘holy book, in the same class as the Bible or the Koran’ (ibid: 7). One of those directly influenced by Marx was Paulo Freire whose dialectical relationship between the oppressor and oppressed mirrors the central antagonistic class relations in the *Manifesto*.

Freire and Marx

The influence of Hegel and Marx is very evident in Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) which had a seismic influence on educational practice and its potential to become a 'subversive force' (Schauhl: 1970: 11) in society which is comparable to Marx's analysis of class relations. Through his work with illiterate *campesinos* in his native Brazil, Freire developed a critical pedagogy which enabled learners to look critically at their social situation and 'act to transform society' and make it more inclusive to their participation (ibid). Central to Freire's methodology is *praxis*, the unity of analysis and action which could result in transformative change or meaningful acts of liberation. Freire regarded reflection without action as mere 'verbalism' and action without reflection as 'action for action's sake' (McCloskey, 2003: 183). Freire's idea of dialogical action was influenced by Marx's dialectical materialism whereby the continual conflict of opposites, such as capitalism and feudalism, would eventually see them pass into one another or into a higher form. Critical to the Freirean and Marxist dialectic is making a direct intervention in the world and changing realities. As Marx famously put in *Theses on Feuerbach*: 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it' (1845: 15).

Both Freire and Marx believed that the oppressed / proletariat should challenge the anti-dialogical practices of the dominant elites which programme us into 'conformity to the logic of its system' (Schauhl, 1996: 16). They do this through cultural domination, the media, and the 'culture of silence' which accompanies the 'unauthentic' existence of marginalisation and poverty. In considering the relevance of Freire's methodology to today's society, Richard Schauhl suggests that:

"Our advanced technological society is rapidly making objects of most of us and subtly programming us into conformity to the logic of its system. To the degree that this happens, we are also becoming submerged into a new 'culture of silence'" (ibid: 15).

Freire, like Marx, ‘stood Hegel on his head’, and turned an idealistic dialectic into a materialist dialectic which meant moving from a relationship based solely on consciousness to one based on social realities. Like Marx, Freire sought to challenge unfair social relations through direct action and recognised the critical role that education plays in this process. One wonders what Freire and Marx would make of contemporary development policy in the shape of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), designed to address persistent levels of poverty, particularly in the global South.

Marx, Freire and the SDGs

The 17 SDGs are ‘a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity’ (UNDP, 2018). They are based on the same fifteen-year time cycle as the preceding Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which fell short of their main target of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger. A UN 2015 report on the MDGs found that the world’s poor remain overwhelmingly concentrated in some parts of the world. In 2011, nearly ‘60 per cent of the world’s one billion extremely poor people lived in just five countries’ (UN, 2015: 3). Why should we believe that the SDGs will be any more successful than the MDGs and, is it dangerous, or reckless even, to throw all our eggs in the same policy basket as seems to be happening in regard to the Global Goals? A perusal of international development bulletins and newsletters seems to throw up an unending conveyor belt of events lending support and legitimacy to the Global Goals but what if they don’t succeed? What are the implications of failure for the world’s poorest people?

Indeed, what would a Marxist analysis of the SDGs look like? One suspects he would have been drawn immediately to an apparent contradiction in their objectives. For example, Goal 13 calls for ‘urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts’ while Goal 8 seeks to ‘Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all’ (The Global Goals, 2018). So, how do we rein in catastrophic rises to the earth’s temperature while increasing growth? As Hickel says of this apparent contradiction:

“All of this reflects awareness that something about our economic system has gone terribly awry. The pursuit of endless industrial growth is chewing through our living planet, producing poverty and threatening our existence. And yet the core of the SDG programme for development and poverty reduction relies precisely on the old model of industrial growth — ever-increasing levels of extraction, production, and consumption” (2015).

I suspect Freire, in a similar vein, would have argued that in order to fix a problem you need to name it. Where do the goals mention neoliberalism; the rampant, deregulated, extreme form of capitalism that has been in the ascendancy since the end of the Cold War (Monbiot, 2016)? He might ask ‘are the Goals designed and equipped to address the fundamental cause of inequality, injustice and inhumanity in the world today’? Now, by way of riposte the international development sector might argue that the Global Goals have had a galvanising effect on governments and multilateral bodies and will put an international focus on international development for 15 years with measurable targets and objectives. However, if the Goals are hobbled from the outset by not engaging with the fundamental causes of inequality – the unjust global economic model propelling development – then how can they possibly succeed? As Hickel suggests, the Goals may ‘not only be a missed opportunity, they are actively dangerous: they will lock in the global development agenda for the next 15 years around a failing economic model that requires urgent and deep structural changes’ (2015).

At the very least, the critical thinkers in the development education / international development sector should be reflecting on this question given the dominance of the Global Goals in our policy environment.

Conclusion

A recent film, *The Young Karl Marx* [*Le Jeune Karl Marx*] (2017), engagingly tells the story of the chaotic period in Marx’s life leading up to the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848. On the run from Paris

to Brussels before finally settling in London, he is in endless meetings, writing, agitating and starting a family. It makes the enduring relevance of the *Manifesto* all the more remarkable as it speaks directly to so much of the economic quandary we find ourselves in today. The dialectic materialism of Marx directly influenced the ground-breaking methodology of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which continues to inspire educators across the world. A revisiting of both these seminal works by Freire and Marx is long overdue by the international development / development education sectors given the parlous state of the global economy, the worrying rise of the far-right and the social and economic polarisation that has characterised the era of neoliberalism. There are doubts as to whether the Sustainable Development Goals have the capacity and intent to rein in the deregulated global economy and the operations of its key stakeholders such as multinational corporations and international banks.

The SDGs are like a comfort blanket to the development sector as they offer an international framework to which everyone can subscribe, couched in comforting language and supported by celebrities, billionaires, governments and civil society movements alike, all sheltering under the same umbrella. But what if they don't succeed, can the world's poorest people afford to wait fifteen years for another development cycle to run its course and fail? Or should we engage now, as I suspect Freire and Marx would urge us to, with the fundamental impediment to development – deregulated capital?

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