Remarks on Communist Manifesto

A brief summary of Part I: Bourgeois and Proletarians

(1) (Philosophy of class antagonism) The history of human society is a history of class antagonism, that is, the strife of the oppressed and the oppressors. It is such strife that transforms the organization of human society. The main strife of the bourgeois society is the antagonism of two classes: the oppressing bourgeois and the oppressed proletarians.

(2) (Bourgeois and proletarians) Bourgeois is a social class grew gradually out of the European feudal system. It represents a new way of production originated from refined forms of division of labor. Accompanied with the fine division of labor is a new way of organizing the process of production. This new way of industrial organization arose tremendous productive power of human production. Riding the rising tide of this new productive power, bourgeois as a social class transformed the feudal society into bourgeois society based on the principle of private property right and free competition. In the process of transforming the feudal system to the bourgeois system, the bourgeois is sweeping majority of the population into poverty, creating a new social class, the class of proletarians.

(3) Bourgeois society is obviously sick and the main symptoms are as follows:

(a) (Absolute poverty of proletarians) proletarians only have their labor to sell to bourgeois to make a living and under the pressure of free competition, they can only sell their labor at the price of their reproduction. This is the problem of absolute poverty of proletarians, and will get worse as time goes because the further refinement in division of labor will further diminish the required skills of individual laborer, reducing the price of labor of the proletarians to the cost of bare subsistence (Ricardo).

(b) (Economic crisis) With the majority of the population (the proletarians) excluded from sharing the fruit of modern production system, there comes the epidemic of over-production in bourgeois society. This epidemic causes economic crisis, periodically threatening to collapse bourgeois system of production.

(4) (Proletarian revolution) The cause of the sickness of (3) is obviously the principle of private ownership of the capital, and the cure is to do away with private ownership (and the free trade principle as well). It is also inevitable that proletarians, as the oppressed majority of the society possessing almost nothing, would naturally try to wrestle the ownership of the capital from bourgeois. This would lead to a communist society without private ownership, in which class distinction and class antagonism would disappear altogether.

Remarks on Part I: Bourgeois and Proletarians

Item (1): The theory of class antagonism is obviously inspired by Hegel’s dialectic philosophical nonsense, which can be traced back to Heraclitus's statement that ``strife is justice" and ``all things come into being by conflict of opposites". Antagonism of opposite classes (oppressed and oppressors) is certainly common in human history, but social stratification of human society is much more complicated than simple pairing of opposite classes.

The main struggle of the mankind has been on how to organize a human society to best facilitate the existing methods of material production. Here the main issue has been, and will remain to be, on how to arbitrate the conflicting self-interest of each individual to allow a group of individuals living in peace side by side and to make collaborations, which is absolutely essential for human production, possible. Social stratification are natural consequences of feasible social organizations and with the formation of social classes, class antagonism is inevitable but it is often balanced by the need of social collaboration.

The strife of the oppressed class, unless representing a major change in the method of material production, are more of a way to induce compromises and reforms that is, sometimes slightly more and sometimes slightly less, favorable to the oppressed.

To over stress the significance and the benefit of brutal struggle among different groups of a human society, and to advocate such struggle on the benefit of the ``oppressed class" is to encourage mean spirited, cruel and destructive fight among different factions of a human society. The theory of class antagonism is perhaps the worst, and the most radical part of the Marxism.

Item (2): If one regards the part of the population who owns no tools of production, and who can rely nothing other than selling their labor to make a living as proletarians. Then the prediction that majority of the population would become proletarians is by large valid. What was terribly wrong was the claim on absolute poverty of the proletarians.

To attribute the power of modern manufacture to division of labor is obviously due to Adam Smith. While division of labor has played a critically important role, to regard it as the fundamental character of the modern industry is misleading. The authors of the manifesto appeared to also believe that, as the industry power is further developed, the skills requested out of the proletarians in the process of production will approach the absolute minimum as the division of labor are further refined. The absolute poverty of the proletarians then naturally followed from this belief and an application of the ``value" based theory of classical political economics (mainly Ricardo): the price of labor equals to the price of simple biological reproduction of a human being. This prediction of absolute poverty and the misery of the proletarians, which is the compelling motivation for the authors of the manifesto to advocate communism, become very far from the reality of modern bourgeois society.

Concerning the principles of the bourgeois society, the authors of the manifesto emphasized the principle of private ownership and the principle of free competition. They more or less ignored the principle of equal political right (democracy): it never gets mentioned. With the benefit of the hinder sight, we can see today that it is the principle of equal political right that made reforms shorter than radical revolutions, which did not appear to be an option for the authors of the manifesto, possible.

The origin and the driving force of the modern industry is modern science and the accompanied technological innovations. Bourgeois (Schumpeter's industrial entrepreneurs) are the ones who has turned these innovations into the fruit of the awesome power of modern production. This is why they represented the revolutionary forces that destroyed the feudal system.

Item (3): The two fundamental problems a human society must solve are the problem of production and the problem of distribution of the produced. At the beginning stage of the bourgeois revolution, the main task was clearly to free the new productive power awaken from the development of modern science and technology from the constraint of the social framework of the feudal system. It was to establish a new social order that would allow the new productive power to grow freely. The issue of distribution of the produced did not appear as a problem, at least not as serious as it became later when the new social order was established and the power of production exploded. As the problem of distribution become apparent, it certainly called for a serious solution. The authors of manifesto appeared to believe that the bourgeois society can not possibly find a feasible solution to resolve the problem of distribution under the established social framework holding private ownership as a guiding principle. Their belief has been proved wrong by the later development of the bourgeois society. They regarded a teething pain of the bourgeois society at the very early stage of its development as fatal sickness of a dying system, for which the best of its time they mistaken as having been long passed.

Item (4): Marxists brag that their prediction of the coming of the communist society is not a utopia but an inevitable future of the evolution of humans society, and this inevitability is a logical conclusion of their analysis of inter-actions of the various social and economic forces of the existing bourgeois society and their future development. This analysis, unfortunately, is essentially a hybrid of a bogus Germen philosophy (Hegel) and a wrong British economic theory (Ricardo). Even assume these two were correct, their argument would only lead to the conclusion that bourgeois society built on the principle of private property right and free trade ALONE would fail. Even If we further assume that the victorious proletarians would decided to abolish private property right and try to build a communist society, the authors of the manifesto still did not offer anything to support their belief that a new society constructed based on communist principle would work for humanity. Did Karl Marx (and Engels) ever thought about the lacking of this part of their logic? Of course! But their answer is so weak that they decided to omit it all together in the manifesto. But these are compelling questions they must answer and their answers were found elsewhere. The following answer is from Engels’s (draft of a communist confession of faith, June 9, 1847):

[Question: On what do you base your community of property?

Answer: Firstly, on the mass of productive forces and means of subsistence resulting from the development of industry, agriculture, trade and colonization, and on the possibility inherent in machinery, chemical and other resources of their infinite extensions. Secondly, on the fact that in the consciousness or feelings of every individual there exists certain irrefutable basic principles which, being the result of the whole historical development, requires no proof.

Question: What are such principles?

Answer: For example, every individual strive to be happy. The happiness of the individual is inseparable from the happiness of all, etc.]

The first principle is no stranger: every individual strive to be happy is the first inspiration of the bourgeois society. The second is for all individuals to act under the guideline that

``happiness of the individual is inseparable from the happiness of all, etc."

Forget about etc. This is to say that, with a society of high material productivity, humanity will be so transformed that the first principle of self-interest is no longer valid. Conflict of individual interest would either no longer exist, or self-interest would no longer be the first principle of human behave: it is replaced by a common good (happiness for all).

How do we objectively define ``happiness for all"? A social organization based on using a vaguely defined ``common good" in the name of social justice to overwrite the first principle of individual self-interest is inevitably a utopia.

The material richness of today's bourgeois society has long exceeded the wildest dreams of Karl Marx's time. Humanity's long struggle for subsistence are over and absolute poverty has become a history of the past. The problems in distribution of consumption goods are resolved by mild social reforms and limited wealth re-distribution. Private ownership and free competition remained to be the guiding principle of social organization of bourgeois society. No proletarian revolution of the kind predicted by this manifesto occurred and no communist utopia has ever been established successfully anywhere. In terms of predicting the social and economic development of the future bourgeois society, the authors are completely off the mark.

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A brief summary of part II: Proletarians and Communists

(1) (Who are the communists) Communists are claimed to be a group of people working on the behalf of the proletarians, whose destination is to overthrow the social and economic order of the bourgeois society and to build a communist society based on the principle of community of properties. The immediate roles of the communists are two folded: the first is like that of the philosophies in the French revolution, that is to educate and to enlighten the proletarians and to spread the gossip of communism; the second is to organize proletarians to form a united front to wrestle political and economical power out of the hand of the bourgeois.

(2) (Myth about communist society) The authors counted a list of horrific myth about the communist society they advocate. They did not deny any of the myth circulated, but they argued that there is nothing horrific about these myth. They pointed out that, in all existing human society, the prevailing ethics, religion and traditional values systems are nothing but an integral part of the existing social organization, designed to maintain the stability of the established social structure. Furthermore, they were introduced mostly on the benefits of the ruling class. If the fundamental principle of social organization alters, then the existing super structure (ethics, values system, etc) would alter accordingly. Therefore to apply the ethic and value system of the bourgeois society to criticize a future and a more advanced way of social organization is pointless.

(3) (Road towards communist society) The authors also claimed that, in transition from bourgeois society to communist society, there will be a period in which proletarians would hold despotic power, presumably, to take over the properties of bourgeois and to impose a new social order. They made a to do list, some belongs to the category of social reform and some hints the establishment of a totalitarian state.

Remarks on Part II: Proletarians and Communists

Item (1): At Karl Marx's time, the bourgeois society was at its infancy. Though human productivity had been greatly improved, it was still at a level far lower than needed to admit an overall economic and social solution to resolve the issue of absolute poverty for all. The leading industrial products remained to be product of subsistence such as textiles, which were tremendously profitable in primitive societies oversea. Therefore the focus of the bourgeois society was to internally push the capacity of production to limit, and externally to occupy the oversea market. This led to the internal policy of cruel exploitation of the proletarians, and the external policy of imperialism.

Karl Marx and his followers (the communists of the manifesto) formed the most radical faction of a group of humanists appalled by the ugliness of the exploitations of the proletarians and sook for social and economic alternative to improve their condition. Through painful defeat they came to the realization that, under the economic conditions of their time, moderate reforms could not be accepted by bourgeois. Nurtured an intense hatred towards the ruling class, they turned to the alternative of overthrowing the existing social and economic order. As humanists, they were also greatly inspired by the ideal of a communist utopia, wishing it to become reality after the existing social and economic order are overthrown.

Karl Marx took the huge task of providing a theory to this radical movement. To succeed he must argue for two things: first the existing social and economic order would inevitably collapse and second the new social and economic order they intend to build is not a utopia but a realistic possibility. For the first he pushed Ricardo's theory of political economics to extreme; for the second he relied on the belief that, as a human society get richer, humanity will be so transformed that the first principle of self-interest would no longer be the guiding principle of individual behavior. The first argument is at least academically serious. The second argument is on one hand vague and on the other hand more like a wishful thinking of a utopian. Note that individual self-interest does not diminish as one gets richer. It goes the other way: the more one possesses, the greedier one becomes.

The Russian communist occurred later was of a completely different group of people with a completely different motivation. The social and economic order they implemented has nothing in common with the theory of Karl Marx except maybe they both used communist Utopia as an inspiring ideal. To use Marxism and the manifesto as the theoretic foundation of their practice in establishing a despotic and totalitarian government illustrated to what degree a honest theory can be distorted to fit the purpose of man of action whose only intention is to gain power over his fellow men.

Item (2): The observation that the prevailing values and ethics system of a human society is an integral part of the established social and economic order is perhaps the most important contribution of Karl Marx to the understanding of humanity. Marx's emphasis of the critically important role of the economic motivation in the organizations of human society is a truly penetrating discovery. It provided a major component that was missing in the previous effort of forming an intellectual understanding of the evolutions of human society. To project a unique trajectory for the evolution of human society, as many Marxist historians insisted later on, is clearly an overstretch; but to deny the critically important role of economic considerations in the organizations of human society would be foolish. Karl Marx's place among the best human intellects in academic sense is secured with this discovery. The gist of author's argument here, that is one can not judge the principle of a future humans society based on the ethic standard of the existing bourgeois society, is largely valid.

One, on the other hand, must be acutely aware that the Manifesto is not an academic document, but a political speech. The purpose of the paragraphs belonging to this item is not to correct a bourgeois of his mis-understanding of the communist myth in a political debate, but to preach rebel of the proletarians. The tone of the authors is not a tone of reason but a tone of hatred and passion. The underlining claim to a bourgeois is that I do not care what you think of me: you are my enemy and I will come to kill you. The underlining claim to the proletarians is to follow me to kill these bastards because they are the source of all your trouble and all your misery. The message to the latter is exactly the reason why a Marxist revolution can never come to pass in a contemporary bourgeois society: who are the proletarians in today's bourgeois society that is under the living conditions described in these paragraphs?

Item (3): This list is a mixture of moderate reforms and radical actions. The items in the category of moderate reforms was adopted by the authors to cover the non-radical fractions of the proletarian movement of their time. Ironically, these are the items that has been realized in the modern bourgeois society. All radical items, reflecting the true believes of the authors of the manifesto, were all pick up by the Russian communists later on in their practice of establishing a totalitarian government. What a shame.

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Part III of the Manifesto provides an example of Marxist analysis of the history: an analysis of the history of the communist movement up to the time of the manifesto. This part is academically elegant but largely irrelevant to our purpose of treating the Manifesto as the theoretic foundation for communism.

End of comments.