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ARTISTS OF DESTRUCTION

Most manifestoes are boring. For a brief moment, they may create a flurry of excitement, but once their immediate cause is gone, they usually sound shrill and their rhetoric seems overblown to the jaded ear of posterity. As a literary form, the manifesto is a modern invention with origins in the seventeenth century. Mass production started early in the twentieth, when no self-respecting movement could do without one. The genre went into a cycle of inflation and subsequent decline.

The exceptions to the rule are quite rare. A document called *The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteenth United States of America* has retained much of its original impact, and even Émile Zola's famous letter is still quoted with respect. The most surprising survivor, however, is certainly *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, a masterpiece written by Messrs. Marx & Engels and published in 1848.

Read today, it is perhaps the most concise and thrilling account of a process which creates havoc in the contemporary world; the inexorable pressure of globalization. Of the four chapters of the *Manifesto*, it is the first (and only the first) which can claim this resonance. Not only do the authors foresee and describe secular developments like urbanisation and the rise of a female working force. They also analyse the crisis mechanism inherent in the capitalist economy with an accuracy unmatched by more recent gurus. They give an account of the vertiginous speed of change to which all modern societies are subject, and they foresee with a precision bordering on clairvoyance the consequences of «infinitely improved communications». They forecast the destruction of traditional basic industries, a catastrophe which has hit many regions and of which we have not yet seen the end. Finally, they see the political implications of a fully globalized economy: the inevitable loss of control on the part of national governments which are reduced to the role of «a committee administering the common business of the bourgeois class» represented today by the multinational corporations.

This is not to say that the authors of the *Manifesto* have proved to be infallible. In fact, their class analysis has turned out to be wide off the mark. The cornerstone of their argument is the claim that «the amount of (industrial) work is increasing». In fact, the opposite is true. The demand for industrial labour has declined in a dramatic way, and the classical working class is dwindling rapidly. A century ago, an enormous part of the working population has been engaged in agriculture; today, 2-3% of the workforce is

producing more food than the 60-80% traditionally occupied in the primary sector. Exactly the same process is now hitting the «proletariat» on which Marx and Engels pinned their revolutionary hope. The concomitant rise of an amorphous and multi-layered middle class has disproved the notion that all intermediate strata are doomed to disappear. Instead, we witness the rapid growth of a new underclass, both on the national and the international scale: millions if not billions of employable people, not even deemed fit for exploitation by the forces of post-modern globalization.

Notwithstanding these flaws, the strength of the *Manifesto* is in its analysis and not in the remedies it offers. Much to the detriment of the Left, New and Old, Marxists have always been hypnotized by the affirmative and utopian side of their founding fathers' work. The disastrous results are by now a matter of record. I have always believed that the strength of Marxism lies in its ruthless *negativity*, its radical criticism of the status quo, and that in this capacity it is still an indispensable tool. As a prophet of «the realm of freedom», Marx shares the fate of many other utopian thinkers. As an artist of demolition, he is unsurpassed. What Walter Benjamin described as «the destructive character» may not be to the liking of people who prefer comfort to reason; but whoever wants to understand the world he lives in cannot do without «l'artiste démolisseur». This is a phrase coined by Baudelaire, who was, like Whitman, a contemporary of Marx and Engels. And these names may suggest another reason for the ongoing fascination of the *Manifesto*. Many parts of it read like great poetry. The grandeur and the misery of the nineteenth century have rarely been expressed with greater force, and while most of the theoretical works of the past, not to mention the strident manifestoes of the avantgarde, are now dead letter, or at best fodder for the academy, the vibrant sentences of Marx and Engels will go on to shock and enlighten the next century.