1. On political influence: the form of a manifesto

* What is a manifesto? It is a specific form of writing: one entirely dependent on its performative aspects, that is, on the triggering of a reaction among its addresses or readers. A political manifesto, for instance, doesn’t only describe or explain political situations, it doesn’t only argue about norms or ideals of politics from a detached perspective, but seeks to provoke a reaction among its readers and intervene in a situation. It does so by assuming a certain position, a partisan position in this very situation. Moreover, a manifesto doesn’t simply address a ready made reader, but seeks to create the very address towards which it is oriented, by influencing individual and collective actions and consciousness.

* A manifesto implies a different relationship between theory and politics: it doesn’t approach political realities in the guise of political science, by submitting phenomena under a general law, nor does it act as political philosophy, by furnishing politics with universal norms or principles; rather, a manifesto tries to enact politics in and through writing, the effect of which is to relate itself to the political forces existing in the present, in order to rally them around a cause, while at the same time shaping their very subjectivity.

* The Communist Manifesto is usually recognised as one of the most influential political texts of our times. The historical backdrop of its composition is to be found in the European revolutions of 1848, on the eve of which the Manifesto was published. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were solicited to compose it by a Paris-based revolutionary organisation of German workers named The League of the Just (later renamed The League of Communists). However, the Manifesto would only see its heydays of political influence in the late 19th century, when Marx and Engels have cemented their intellectual importance in the workers’ movement.

2. History and Enlightenment history

* The significance of Marx’s view of history presented in the Manifesto can be grasped by placing it in a wider intellectual context, especially by comparing it with the views of history presented in the Enlightenment. The philosophical preoccupation with history is something closely connected to the movement of the Enlightenment and its principal political goal: the betterment of humanity, which Enlightenment philosophers understood as the development and universalisation of human freedom.

* The Enlightenment develops the idea of ‘universal history’: which doesn’t simply mean an account of history which is empirically total, encompassing the history of humanity as a while, but that which can be rendered intelligible according to universal principles. One of the foremost totalising gestures of the Enlightenment: the idea of progress, namely, the idea that history develops in a continuous and uniformly
ascending way, that it develops linearly and irreversibly, and can be measured in terms of a constant perfectioning of human societies and human individuals – a perfectioning conceived either in technical terms (science, technology, the organisation of the economy and society), or in moral terms (autonomy, education, creative freedom and potentials). As a history of progress, the Enlightenment view of history is teleological: history is driven forward by a definite goal – the achievement of an ideal state.

* An exemplary Enlightenment concept: Kant’s view of history as an ‘epic tale of the Law’: history being the realisation of freedom, the foremost shape this can take in human societies is the form of juridical and political institutions. Law is a rational form which has a civilising and an emancipatory function, as it provides the missing link between the ideal projection of a human morality, and the naturalistic aspects of human existence, such as the propensity towards competition. Law civilises societies in the long-run, just as moral education transforms individuals. History is a history of continuous reform of the individuals.

* Marx and Engels: critique of the Enlightenment philosophy of progress. History doesn’t progress by its ‘good side’ (education, reform, moral betterment) but by its ‘bad side’ (crises, insurrections, irreconcilable contradictions, violent overturnings). History and historical change are not linear, but proceeds through discontinuities, through ruptures and leaps. Moreover, historical change is not to be identified with piecemeal reforms, or with slow moral betterment, but is related to revolutions and shocks, as well as the actions and decisions of social forces the present.

* Marx’s anti-utopianism: against all utopian or reformist projections of societal organisation, which propose ready-made models or blueprints for the future, while identifying the implementation of this model with patent reforms. Instead, historical change conceived as struggle: as the exacerbation of contradictions, and as political action in the present, carried out collectively through mass engagement.

* The catchword for history: ‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’. History is a constant struggle against inequality, injustice, domination and oppression, but also of the production of inequalities, injustices and oppressions. Class struggle as an explanatory principle: Marx conceives it as a structural principle, which does not imply two ready-made agents or groups, but where the actors of the struggle proceed from this struggle itself, as its result. Social classes do not exist prior to their struggle, but are a result of antagonistic social processes and dynamics.

* One of the basic premises of Marx’s ‘historical materialism’: the existence of two contradictory tendencies in society, tendencies whose basis resides in the economic processes of production under generalised commodity exchange. One the one hand, the tendency of capital in its struggle against wage-labour: a struggle proceeding daily, which makes the process of labour a process of the production of profit, and the continuous reduction of labour to a commodity (with different technical revolutions and the like). On the other hand: the daily struggle of the workers which assures the conditions of labour, necessary for the reproduction of labour power – that is, the very material existence of the working class, and in exertion, which creates the political resistance of the workers which attempts to end the wage-relationship as such.

* Two sides of class struggle: an objective one (antagonistic social processes), and a subjective one (political consciousness and organisation, something related to the actions and decisions of the present). Thus also, two sides of the revolutionary agent:
the working class (a class objectively determinable in terms of socio-economic processes), and the proletariat (which is the political side of the working class, existing through actions, organisations, consciousness, ideologies, manifestos, etc.).

3. Marx’s Critique of Politics

* A critique of the limitations of the French Revolution: an incomplete revolution. If the French Revolution, with its universalisation of the principle of juridical equality (equality before the law) and of the idea of citizenship has removed restrictions to politics participation which existed in feudalism (the entire system of privileges and the supposedly ‘natural hierarchies’), it has stopped short of bringing about a true idea of quality. Marx claims that modern political forms – the constitutional republic organised around representative democracy, the rule of law – even if they have introduced considerably freedoms over the feudal and monarchical regimes, still leave multiple freedoms and inequalities untouched. Moreover, they participate in the very reproduction of their conditions. Political citizenship and legal equality leave untouched one of the pinnacles of capitalist inequality – private property. In fact, they reproduce it and sanctify it, by masking innumerable acts of domination and exploitation between a halo of freedom and universality.

* A short circuit exists between politics and the economy: “The state is but the committee for the managing of common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie”. A radical conclusion: the necessity not only of political or legal reforms, but of revolutionary change, a change not only perpetuated through state mechanisms, but a change where the state as such will be abolished, alongside the abolishment of the great inequalities of wealth in capitalism.

4. Communism as a Revolutionary Process

* The Manifesto does not present communism as a definite programme, let alone a ready-made model: it identifies it with struggle and with a result of struggle. Communism does proceed from existent socio-economic and political processes, but at the same time it cannot be directly anticipated and determined in advance from the present. As a radical change of the very principles of societal organisation, it cannot be deduced starting from given principles.

* Marx defines communism in the negative: the end of class struggle and of domination, the end of the state as an autonomised political or coercive apparatus, the end of oligarchical power and of the inegalitarian concentration of wealth, the end of differences between intellectual and manual labour, the end of the patriarchate and of the exploitation of women, the end of the differences between the town and the country, the end of private egoistic appropriation. But he also defines the process leading to it through a series of paradoxes: a class struggle to end classes, a seizing of state power to abolish all forms of power, a form of temporary domination to end all domination.

* Ambivalence of the Manifesto on historical change: on the one hand, it does propose a certain idea of historical necessity, even inevitability – Marx’s ‘historical materialism’ took the guise of a science, with laws akin to those of 19th century scientific formulation, thus a certain determinism. On the other hand, there is an emphasis on will and action, on a call to subjectivity, and a fundamental acknowledgment of the unpredictability and openness of history.