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REMEMBER THE FUTURE?
THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO AS
HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL FORM

Peter Osborne

The *Communist Manifesto* is without doubt the most influential single text written in the nineteenth century, in any language, by some considerable way. Indeed, it may stand as a metonym for the desire called 'history' which coursed through that century in the wake of the French Revolution. Situated at the hinge between Hobsbawm's ages of revolution and capital (1789–1848 and 1848–1870), as described in the first two volumes of his great trilogy on the long 19th century, from the French Revolution to the First World War, the Manifesto presents the historical dialectic between these two terms ('revolution' and 'capital') in two equally extraordinary, though no longer equally convincing, ways: from the standpoint of the prospectively successive revolutionary historical roles of the social classes of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, respectively. It is in the disjunction between these two presentations that the meaning of the text must be sought today. For with the disappearance of the horizon of proletarian revolution, and the retreat to the spirit world of the famous 'spectre' of communism, the text has undergone a profound transformation. In short, the *Manifesto* appears to have been transformed from an eschatological *tour de force*, in which the end of capitalism was assured ('What the bourgeoisie . . . produces, above all, is its own **gravediggers**'), into what Marshall Berman has notoriously described as a 'lyrical celebration of bourgeois **works**':² a celebration, more specifically, of the *revolutionary temporality of capitalism*; a capitalism which – without a **fundamental countervailing** force – appears now as open-ended. From the standpoint of the philosophy of history, communism as the eschatological absolute has given way to the 'bad infinity' of capitalism – 'the affirmation as negation of the **finite**'³ – capitalism without end, amen.

Or at least, so it would seem. But does the rest of the *Manifesto*

belong unambiguously to a shape of life grown old? Or is there another sense in which it is still a 'living' text, **after** the fall of historical communism? Is there, perhaps, *new* life in it today? What lives in the *Communist Manifesto*? In particular – and this is the question I shall address here – what is the temporal character of its address to us, citizen-subjects of Western capitalist democracies? How does it inscribe us into historical time, *today*?

1. THE POETRY OF TRANSITION

Let me quote what is probably – in the wake of Marshall **Berman's** path-breaking work – the most cited passage from the *Communist Manifesto*, in a Western academic context, over the last 15 years:

The bourgeoisie, historically, has **played** a most revolutionary part. The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound men and women to their 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between people than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious **feravour**, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy waters of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless infeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct brutal exploitation. [. . . The bourgeoisie] has been the first to show what human activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades.

And now, what is for **Berman** the most important part:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men and women are at last compelled to face with sober senses, their real conditions of life, and their relations with their **kind.**

More specifically, according to **Marx** in the passage which follows, this

'constant revolutionising' has three main effects: economic and cultural globalization; subjection of the countryside to the towns; and political centralization in the form of new state-led or state-created nations. What is this but – as **Berman** describes it in the subtitle of his fine book – 'the experience of modernity'?

The culture of capital is the systemic instantiation of a Mephistophelean spirit of negation. And what is the Communist Manifesto from the standpoint of such a negation – a Manifesto without belief in the world-historical agency of the working classes, and with an acknowledgement of the powers of states and capitals to contain what had appeared to Marx as ultimately unmanageable crises; what is the Communist *Manifesto* in this context – in which the 'sorcerer' of modern society has regained a certain crucial measure of control over its powers – but, as **Berman** puts it, 'the archetype of a century of modernist manifestoes and movements to come . . . the first great modernist work of art'? When, in his Preface to the 1893 Italian edition of the Manifesto, **Engels** wrote of Dante as 'both the last poet of the Middle Ages and the first poet of modern times', in order to conjure the prospect of the 'new Dante, who will mark the hour of birth of this new proletarian era', he was appealing to national sentiment in Italy. Yet it is hard to read this passage without imputing a reference (if only unconscious) to Marx and to the Manifesto itself. However, if the era that was **approaching** was not in fact a proletarian one, but rather one of capitalism on a **global** scale, what does Marx become, if not the poet of the transition to capitalism; a prefiguration, in epic mode, of Baudelaire and Flaubert? The Manifesto appears as a work of modernist historiography: the experience of mid **nineteenth-century** European capitalism, writ large.

As **Berman** argues, the Manifesto's prose is driven by, and expresses in dissident form, a relentless temporal logic of negation, which derives, historically, from the logic of capital itself. Once the historically-specific political demands, and corresponding social content, of such a manifesto are set aside or judged to be superseded, it would seem, it cannot but appear (as it appears to **Berman**) in its pure modernist form, as an *identification* with, and will to, this abstract temporal **logic** itself. As I have argued elsewhere, in its purest form, modernism simply is the cultural affirmation of the abstract temporal **logic** of negation.' Think, for example, of the first great Russian Futurist Manifesto of 1912, the Hylaea group's wonderfully entitled Slap in the Face of *Public Taste*, with the second of its 'orders' regarding poets' rights: the right to 'feel an insurmountable hatred for the

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language existing before their time'. Or of the yearning, at once theoretically abstract and **phenomenologically** concrete, expressed in the great concluding sentence of the first *Manifesto* of Surrealism (1924): 'Existence is elsewhere.'

The 'melting vision' of **Berman's** modernist Marx extends beyond the specific futurities of **qualitative** historical novelty in the name of which such manifestoes are written (be they communist, futurist, or surrealist), to a generalised existential modernism that dissolves political subjectivity into the movement of time itself. **Berman's** Marx is, in this respect, rather surprisingly, something of a poststructuralist Marx. This is a modernism which celebrates in ecstatic fashion

the glory of modern energy and dynamism, the ravages of modern disintegration and nihilism, the strange intimacy between them; the sense of being caught in a vortex where all facts and values are whirled, exploded, decomposed, recombined; a basic uncertainty about what is basic, what is valuable, even what is real; a flaring up of the most radical hopes in the midst of their radical negations.'

'Time is everything, man is nothing; at the most, he is time's **carcase**. Quality no longer **matters**.'¹⁰ Or at least, that's how it looks from the standpoint of the 'fact' of modern industry. But is this standpoint all that's left after the demise of the proletariat as the agent of history? Is there really no time left in the Manifesto, for us, today, other than the time of capital, culturally generalised into that of an abstract, badly infinite modernity? No time other than that of the new as the 'ever-same', as Benjamin put it; the new as 'an invariant: the desire for the new', in **Adorno's** words?" Is there no time other than the time of 'uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation', which is nonetheless, mysteriously, somehow restricted in its play to the compass of a single social form (capitalism)? No time but that of the expanded reproduction of capital, the relentless self-expansion of the value-form? Is there no place **left** in the text of the Manifesto, for us, today, for another time, a **qualitatively** different time, a different kind of futurity, a *historical futurity*, closer to the text's original intent?

It is hard to pursue such questions without running into a barrier: the theoretical failure of Marxism to address the question of 'history' as a problem about the character of historical time. The Marxist tradition has tended either to reject the field of the philosophy of history as such, in the name of a temporally naive notion of historiography as a science (in which the **future** appears only as an extrapolation of past and present within a naturalised chronological time – never as

a dimension of social **being** in its own right); or to adopt the temporal structure of Hegelianism (the eternal present as the standpoint of absolute knowing). More often, it has tried to do both at once. Marxism lacks a philosophically adequate conception of historical **time**.¹² Yet, in the text of the *Manifesto*, historical time, a qualitative historical time, looms **large**; not merely in the sense of the historian, the sense of the past ('The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'), but in the existential sense of a universalised demand on the future, **dynamised** by the present, claiming that future for itself: 'In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.' We shall have . . . a non-capitalist future. This is a demand not unlike that about which **Kant** writes in the *Critique of Judgment*: the 'strange' demand made by the reflective judgment of singularity which requires agreement from **all**.¹³ It would be a mistake to take this 'we shall have' for a prediction, in any **straightforward** sense of the term. The *Manifesto* displays, in a practical form, a sophistication about historical time which is lacking from **Marx's** methodological writings about history.

There is a powerful existential dimension to the Communist *Manifesto*, a particular quality of **futurity**, which, as **Berman** recognises, belies the sociological schematism and historical **stagism** of its account of classes and modes of production. **Berman's** reading focuses on this dimension. Indeed, it celebrates it. Yet it also dehistoricises it – takes the history out of it – in a very particular way. It dehistoricises its futurity, its identification with qualitative historical novelty, by reducing it to the abstract temporal logic of negation of a **generalised** modernity. In fact, paradoxically, it dehistoricises it (the **quality** of its futurity) in the very act of purporting to explain it, historically, as the cultural affect of a particular form of social time: the time of the expanded reproduction of capital, the revolutionary temporality of the bourgeoisie. The impulse towards a different future, a non-capitalist future, is thus evacuated from the text, not merely by **Berman's** notorious neglect of its historical argumentation (the class struggle), but at the level of its temporal-existential form as well. **Berman's** reading partakes in the dehistoricising movement of the purely existential, heroic modernism which it purports to explain. Yet what meaning can **Marx's** 'we shall have' possess – a 'we shall have' of qualitative historical novelty – today, when the horizon of socialist revolution has disappeared? What meaning can it have except, as

Berman implies, that of an abstractly energising hope, circulating within the closed walls of the disintegrative turbulence of capitalist societies themselves? Or to put the same question another way: from where else might the existential force of the *Manifesto* derive?

One way to approach this question is through an analysis of the temporality of the text as a historical and cultural form.¹⁴

2. MONTAGE AND MEDIATION IN THE MANIFESTO FORM

The first thing to note is that the *Communist Manifesto* is the syncretic product of a number of **pre-existing**, historically discrete literary forms, each of which represents a separate compositional element, the history of which may be traced through the *Manifesto's* relations to earlier texts and manuscript materials by Marx and Engels themselves. To begin with, for example, one might attend to the text's origins in the catechism form of Engels' *Principles of Communism* (October 1847), which was a revised version of his own earlier *Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith*, from June of the same year – the written-up version of the draft programme discussed at the First Congress of the Communist League. Comparison of the three documents reveals successive transformations of the catechism form as it is progressively subordinated to, and **integrated** into, a narrative form. Thus, the first version (June 1847) begins:

Question 1: *Are you a Communist?*

Answer: Yes.

Question 2: *What is the aim of the Communists?*

Answer: To organize society in such a way that every member of it can develop and use all his [her] capacities and powers in complete freedom and without thereby infringing the basic conditions of society.

Question 3: *How do you wish to achieve this aim?*

Answer: By elimination of private property and its replacement by common property. . .¹⁵

This is a suitable form for a secret society – as the League of the Just had been, out of which the Communist League emerged – or a religious sect. It is a formal, repetitive, ritualised dialogue form.

In Engels' second version, four months later, this has become:

Question 1: *What is Communism?*

Answer: Communism is the doctrine of the conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat.

Question 2: *What is the proletariat?*

Answer: The proletariat is that class of society which . . .¹⁴

The mode of address has been generalised and objectivised. The content of the dialogue is no longer focused on the existential dimension of being and acting, on becoming a communist – a confession of faith – but on the principles of the doctrine itself. We have moved from the cellar into the schoolroom.

In the final version, the *Manifesto* itself, mainly written by **Marx** in January **1848**, after a brief period of collaboration with **Engels** the previous month, there is a dramatic shift of register into the famous Gothic narrative mode:

A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French radicals and German police spies. . .

Or, if you prefer to take section one as the proper beginning, into a sweeping historical panorama:

The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

Only at the very end of section two, nearly two thirds of the way through the text as a whole, do we find the programmatic list of measures that the communists plan to undertake (this is another embedded form: the political programme). By comparison, the *Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith* placed the demands of the movement up front, although it stated them only in the most general terms. Moreover, here, in the *Manifesto*, these demands are subordinated to a wider narrative, within which they are but a transitional moment, extending into a qualitatively different future, which climaxes with an account of what it is that 'we shall have' in place of the old bourgeois society: 'an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.' The temporal locus of the text is no longer the eternal present of secret society or schoolroom, but the contradictory historical present of capitalist societies, packed tight with the productive energies of human history and the accumulated memories of struggles between classes, bursting with the anticipation of a specific future (communism).

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Yet the existential dimension of the earlier versions persists, not merely in the phenomenological force of the descriptions of the revolutionary temporality of capitalist societies (highlighted by **Berman**) and the degradation of labour within them (which he ignores), but in the intermittent irruption into the narrative of the 'we' and the 'you': the registration in direct speech of the displaced survival of the catechism, through which the contradictions of the historical process are given voice in rhetorical form. There is a subtle interweaving within the text of the Manifesto of what Benveniste distinguishes with his technical use of the terms 'narrative' and 'discourse': where discourse is a linguistic form marked by the temporal proximity of its objects to the present of its utterance, while narrative cultivates temporal distance and objectivity, through the preferential use of the third person, along with the aorist, imperfect and pluperfect tenses, avoiding the present, perfect and future.¹⁷ This is in many ways a problematic distinction, theoretically, but it is useful here nonetheless, to register the shifts between verb tenses and modes of address within the *Manifesto*, through which the enormous weight of its narrative content (history as the history of modes of production and the conflicts between their constitutive social classes) is brought to bear on the point of the present of reading.

Section two of the *Manifesto* begins in the schoolmasterly, question-and-answer mode of Engels' Principles of Communism – 'In what relation do the Communists stand to the proletarians as a whole?' – but as the answer develops, voices proliferate. Objections interject ('Do you mean the property of the petty artisan and of the small peasant, a form of property that preceded the bourgeois form? . . . Or do you mean modern bourgeois property?'), multiply ('But does wage labour create any property for the labourer?'), and are rebuffed ('Not a bit. It creates capital.', etc). The text becomes the site of an argument in the fullest sense of the word, as the reader is pulled back and forth between different standpoints within the overall narrative flow.

Allied to this is the complex universality and singularity of the text's 'we'. Not only is the dialogical 'you' – 'You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property' – multiple and flexible, projecting the reader into the position of various objectors, but Marx also clearly exploits the fourth of the poets' rights ordered by the first of the Russian Futurist manifestoes (referred to above): namely, the right 'to stand on the rock of the word "we" amidst the sea of boos and outrage.'" This rock is **only** rarely inhabited these days; people fear the colonialising **impulses** it arouses. Yet **Marx's** 'we' is at once differential and cumulative. It is the authorial 'we' of the writer; the more

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inclusive 'we' of author and readers (the 'we' of 'as we have seen, above'); the specific and strongly distinguishing 'we' of 'we communists'; and finally, climactically, it is the universal 'we' of the 'we shall have', which is also the 'we' of what we shall have: namely, 'an association in which the free development of each [each 'I'] is the condition for the free development of all' – the 'we' of an absolute (one might say, a 'philosophical') universality via which the reader passes, almost without noticing, into the standpoint of a post-capitalist historical view; a 'we' through which we readers, in the present, are offered an oppositional political identity within the present, through identification with the individuated universality of a 'we' of the future: 'an association in which . . . each . . . for . . . all'.

Finally, one might mention the length of the text, the duration of reading and conceiving. The Manifesto's combination of brevity (a mere fourteen thousand words), with breadth (human societies past and future), characteristic of the manifesto as a form, produces a vibrant imagism at the heart of the narrative, as vast swathes of historical experience are condensed into single images: 'all that is solid melts into air'. The brevity of the text seals it up into an autonomous totality which **figures** history as a whole, producing an eschatological effect similar to that described by Walter Benjamin in his account of the production of 'now-time' out of the ruptural force of the dialectical image: the image at 'the now of recognisability', as he called it in his Arcades Project.¹⁹

It is surprising that Benjamin left us without a reading of the Communist *Manifesto*, without doubt the most 'Benjaminian' of Marx's texts, and, one might argue, the high point of the German Romantic influence on Marx. (The essence of Romanticism, for Benjamin, lay in its messianism.)²⁰ Yet Benjamin did leave us an account of capitalist modernity as cultural meltdown – 'a vast process in which literary forms are being melted down' – in his writings of the 1920s and 30s. And he connected this meltdown, explicitly, to new experiences of time, associated with the interacting forces of commodification, technology and urbanism (one might add, migration); forces which gave rise to new media and forms of representation (photography, film, newspapers, advertisements) in relation to which the history of the manifesto form itself must be located. If Dadaism was an attempt to match the effects of film within the (technically obsolete) medium of painting,²¹ so the Manifesto may be understood as an attempt to invent a literary form of political communication appropriate to a period of mass politics on an international scale. (Ease of translation is an

important feature of the directness of its style.) 'One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only **later**'²³ – in this case, by television.

The sense of an autonomous totality, produced by the sweeping historical overview of the first two sections of the *Manifesto* (sections three and four are in many ways programmatic appendages), has all the radically temporalising qualities associated by Benjamin with the timelessness of the dialectical image. We find a similar historiographical timelessness, or absolutization of narrative unity via a deregulation of the play of the opposition of 'narrative' to 'discourse', in **Rancière's** reading of Michelet as the historian of 'the absolute nominal phrase', which abolishes temporal markers in order to absolutize the meaning of the **present**.²⁴ The temporality of the *Manifesto* cannot be reduced to that of the absolute nominal phrase; it is far more internally complex than that. Yet a not dissimilar effect is produced by its first two sections as a whole, by their imagistic force. They function much like a history painting, a triptych, in which images of past, present, and future coalesce as tensely interacting forms. In fact, one could argue that this peculiar effect of radical futurity via temporal suspension is a feature of the absolutism of the manifesto form in general, in which, as Tristan Tzara put it, one must 'organize prose into a form that is absolutely and irrefutably **obvious**'.²⁵ A manifesto being, on Tzara's definition: 'a communication made to the whole world, whose only pretension is the discovery of an instant cure for political, astronomical, artistic, parliamentary, agronomical and literary syphilis . . . it is always **right**'.²⁶ A manifesto is primarily a performance. (Tzara, incidentally, declared himself to be as against manifestos, 'in principle', as he was 'against **principles**'.)²⁷ The *Communist Manifesto* is distinguished by the way it offsets the arbitrariness of the **literary** absolutism inherent in the manifesto form (demonstrated so brilliantly by Tzara) with historical argumentation woven throughout both its narrative and discursive modes. Ultimately, however, the force of this argument is dependent upon the structure of experience constructed by the manifesto form.

Marx drew on a multiplicity of received forms to **forge** the 'absolute obviousness' of the *Communist Manifesto*: the catechism, the historical narrative, the gothic tale, the **political programme** – to which one might add the critique (the critique of political economy, condensed into the description of capitalism) and the literary review (of previous socialist and communist literature, in section three). Six different literary forms, at least, fused together within the framework of a seventh: the manifesto. The *Communist Manifesto* is a *montage*. It

stages 'a rebirth of the epic out of the technique of **montage**'.²⁸ More specifically, it constructs a complex existential mediation of historical time through a syncretic combination of historically discrete literary forms, each of which retains an aspect of autonomy within the whole. It embodies a historical **futurity** of qualitative newness, independent of its penultimate narrative act (proletarian revolution), in the historical dimension of its cultural form. Add to this, the contextual dimension of its reception – the way in which meaning is produced as an articulation or reorganisation of existing structures of experience – and one begins to get a sense of the extraordinary density of historical relations which underlie and animate the apparent simplicity of its appeal. None of this is registered in **Berman's** modernist reading; brilliant as it is in its (ironically) limited way.

There is a complex plurality of times at play in the *Manifesto* in addition to the revolutionary temporality of capital; forms of temporality which survive the demotion in the historical role of its main character (the proletariat, purported agent of the new era); forms of futurity which construct the prospect of the qualitative historical novelty of a post-capitalist society out of the experience of the contradictions of the existing social form. **Berman's Marx**, on the other hand, is a one-dimensional modernist, in thrall to the disintegrative effects of time itself. **Berman's** reading of the *Manifesto* aims to 'give modernist art and thought a new solidity and invest its creations with an unsuspected resonance and **depth**'.²⁹ Yet it is the pure temporal modernism of the desire for the new, the new as an invariant, alone, which he uncovers; thereby robbing the *Manifesto* of its distinctive historical resonance and depth. For the *Manifesto* surely belongs to another modernism, to what Jeff Wall has called 'the dream of a modernism with social content', an 'openly socially critical modernist art',³⁰ in which formal innovation is a reflective but nonetheless **constructive** play with the culturally mediated aspects of social forms; a modernism for which form is the medium for the expression of the contradictions of historically specific social relations. This dream continues to inspire a diverse array of cultural projects. It serves well as a description of Walter Benjamin's work. The idea that cultural forms are sites for the articulation of social contradictions is central to such a dream. I would therefore like to end with some brief remarks about the absence from **Berman's** reading of the *Manifesto* of the contradictory social content underlying the revolutionary temporality of capital; an absence which, read symptomatically, draws our attention to certain crucial weaknesses within the *Manifesto* itself.

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3. UTOPIANISM AND 'SOBER SENSE'

It is a remarkable feature of **Berman's** reading of the *Manifesto* that while it restricts itself to the horizon of capital (positing capital as the source of its utopian energy), it is nonetheless parasitic on a utopian vision that is integrally connected to **Marx's** discourse on communism, a discourse which **Berman** neglects. This is the sleight of hand that transfigures **Marx's** appreciation of the enormous, but relative, historical advance of capitalism into an *absolutization* of its productivity, independent of its status as a historical (and therefore, of necessity, eventually a passing) social form. **Berman** transfers the 'absolutism' of the *Manifesto's* theoretical and literary form wholly onto capital, yet, from the standpoint of the text's narrative structure, the (socially contradictory) productivity of capitalism appears as a historical advance only from the point of view of a post-capitalist future; a point of view that **Berman's Marx** can no longer sustain. In this respect (with regard to the temporal logic of the text), **Berman's** reading suffers from a fatal incoherence: it invests capital with a utopian charge which cannot, even theoretically, be redeemed. Hence its reduction of utopianism to energetics: 'the glory of modern energy and dynamism, the ravages of modern disintegration and nihilism', and 'the strange intimacy between them'. What **Berman** leaves out is any account of the social sources of the dynamism of capital, the revolutionary temporality of which he celebrates.

The reason this was possible lies within the *Manifesto* itself: in a series of systematic slippages and contradictions in its treatment of the relations between its four main ideas: the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, communism and capital. Space prohibits a proper discussion of these relations here. Suffice to say, the *Manifesto*: (1) conflates the bourgeoisie with capital; while (2) placing the proletariat outside of capital (**neglecting** its existence as variable capital); thereby (3) enabling a conflation of the proletariat with communism; while (4) reducing capitalism to the **logic** of capital (neglecting its articulations with other, historically received social forms). As a result, its inherently 'discursive' **futurity** is curtailed; subordinated to the proletariat's 'narrative' role. The dynamism that the *Manifesto* attributes to the bourgeoisie ('i.e. capital', as the English translation has it at one point) must actually be considered an effect of the dialectic of social classes, as structured, not only by the conditions of capital accumulation, but by the totality of social relations obtaining at any particular time. (Think of the importance of immigration to the history of capitalism,

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for example; not simply in the **paradigm-case** of the USA, but as a whole.) The power of capital to annihilate received social forms has turned out to be considerably less absolute (indeed, considerably less desirable from the standpoint of the accumulation of capital) than Marx supposed. This is one of the main things that the *Manifesto* draws our attention to today, via the failure of its imagined negation: the continuing vitality within the most advanced capitalist societies of supposedly 'pre-capitalist' social forms.

It is extraordinary that **Berman** should choose to absolutise the disintegrative, purely abstract temporal modernism of the *Manifesto's* 'melting' vision – the elimination of every social bond other than 'naked self-interest' – at the very moment when a whole complex of non-economic (or at least, not immediately economic) social relations has come to the fore, politically, in advanced capitalist societies; **including** all those that the *Manifesto* would have capitalism dissolve (religion, occupational status, family, nation, age, sex), along with others (such as race and ethnicity) which it fails to mention. This is of enormous **significance**, not only because of what it tells us about the importance to capitalism of what the value-form would destroy (or at best, ignore) – what Balibar calls 'the binding agents of a historical collectivity of individuals', which are subject to a contradictory reintegration into the circuits of capital³ – but also because of what it has to tell us about the constitutive role of fantasy in social and political processes. For despite **Berman's** selection of 'sober sense' as one of the most important features of the *Manifesto's* celebration of capitalism – the compulsion of men and women to face 'their real conditions of life and their relations with their kind' – sober sense, in this specific sense of a theoretically adequate 'demystified' sense, is actually and understandably rather thin on the ground. It is more likely to be via a consideration of the ineliminability of fantasy and imagination from the constitution of social and **political** identities that the relations between *finitude*, *futurity*, and *social form* are to be understood.

The social forms that Marx would have capitalism destroy live on within it, transformed, as both points of identification and **functioning** relations, suffused with fantasy in ways which cannot be fully comprehended apart from their 'non-capitalistic dimensions'. For a **future** beyond capitalism has been figured from its very beginnings, not merely by pre-capitalist social forms (romantic anti-capitalism), but in the concept of political community itself. Writing of the experience of history made possible by the technology of the photograph, Benjamin remarks that

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the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search . . . for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.¹³

Reading the *Communist Manifesto* today, one can find a number of such spots, not in those parts which are closest to us, but in those 'sparks of contingency' which now seem farthest away.

NOTES

1. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, London, 1962; *The Age of Capital*, London, 1975.
2. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Verso, London, 1982, p.92.
3. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. W.H. Johnson and L.G. Struthers, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1929, Vol.1, p.164.
4. This essay is a truncated version of a paper presented to the conference 'The Criticism of the Future' organized by the School of English at the University of Kent, Canterbury, England, 11 July 1997, from which a broader philosophical argument has been removed. An extended version, reflecting more widely upon the question of 'what is living and what is dead' in Marx's text, will appear in John Fletcher et al, *Return of the Gothic*, forthcoming.
- Quotations from the *Manifesto* are taken from the English translation in Karl Man: and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 6, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1976, pp. 477-519. This translation also appears in a pocket-book edition by the same publisher (1952ff), along with translations of various of Marx's and Engels' Prefaces.
5. Translation altered to amend 'man' to 'men and women', 'people' or 'human' as appropriate, in the spirit of the critique of abstract humanism in *The German Ideology* (1845).
6. Berman, *All That Is Solid*, pp.89, 102.
7. Peter Osborne, *The Politics of rime: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, Verso, London and New York, 1995, pp.13-14, 23.
8. Anna Lawton (ed.), *Russian Futurism Through its Manifestos, 1912-1928*, trans. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1988, pp.51-2; 'Manifesto of Surrealism' in André Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1972, p.47.
9. Berman, *All That Is Solid*, p.121.
10. Karl Marx, 'The Poverty of Philosophy' (1947), in Marx/Engels, *Collected Works* 6, p.127.
11. Walter Benjamin, 'Central Park', trans. Lloyd Spencer, *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985), p.46 ; Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, Routledge, London and New York, 1984, p.41.
12. See Osborne, *The Politics of rime*, pp.3, 23-32.
13. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1987, p.58. Hannah Arendt insisted that it was here, in

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- the *Critique of Judgment*, that Kant's political philosophy was to be found. See her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982.
14. What follows is not intended as a comprehensive analysis. It merely outlines some of the main features to which such an approach could be expected to attend.
 15. Engels, 'Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith', in *Marx/Engels, Collected Works*, 6, p.96.
 16. Engels, 'Principles of Communism', in *ibid.*, p.341.
 17. Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek, University of Miami Press, Coral Gables, 1971, pp.195–215.
 18. *Russian Futurism*, p.52.
 19. Walter Benjamin '[Re The Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]', in Gary Smith (ed.), *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetic, History*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1989, pp. 50ff.
 20. Walter Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism'(1920), in his *Selected Writings. Volume I, 1913–1926*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1996, pp. 185–6, note 3. Benjamin quotes Friedrich Schlegel: 'The revolutionary desire to realize the kingdom of God on earth is the elastic point of progressive civilization and the inception of modern history.' See also Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Bernard and Cheryl Lester, SUNY, 1988.
 21. Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in his *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock, New Left Books, London, 1977, p.89.
 22. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in his *Illuminations*, Fontana, London, 1973, p.239.
 23. *Ibid.*
 24. Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, trans. Hassan Melehy, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1994.
 25. Tristan Tzara, 'Dada Manifesto' (1918), in his *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, trans. Barbara Wright, Calder Publications, London, 1977, p.3.
 26. Tzara, 'Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love', in *ibid.*, p.33.
 27. Tzara, 'Dada Manifesto', in *ibid.*, p.3.
 28. Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, p.71. Caygill uses the phrase to summarise Benjamin's reading of Döblin's novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.
 29. *All That Is Solid*, p.122.
 30. Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham? Kammerspiel*, Art Metropole, Toronto, p.100.
 31. Etienne Balibar, in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. Chris Turner, Verso, London and New York, 1991, p.8.
 32. Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in his *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, New Left Books, London, 1979, p.243.