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The Communist Manifesto and the Concepts of Civilization and Barbarism

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A few days ago, along with two excellent colleagues, I presented a new edition of the *Biblioteca del Pueblo* collection, which brings together three classic texts of revolutionary thought: *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Our America* (1891) by José Martí, and *History Will Absolve Me* (1953) by Fidel Castro. I was assigned the task of introducing the first of these works. Alongside the Bible, it is one of the most printed and translated texts in the world over the past 177 years. However, I suspect that while it is widely referenced, its content is not always well known.

Since the fall of the so-called socialist bloc, the mass media, bourgeois academia, and mainstream politicians have seized the moment of disorientation experienced by the public and by some armchair Marxist intellectuals. These figures, often removed from the concrete struggles of history, have declared Marxism dead. Ironically, these are the real extremists, the ones who cling to the letter rather than the meaning, and who, in their literalism and rigidity, stumble when confronted with the

complex and winding path of historical development. Without understanding the underlying message, one cannot appreciate its true significance.

*The Communist Manifesto* is a brilliant analysis of bourgeois society in its time. Although we certainly need a bold and accurate update for today's context, the Manifesto lays out in clear language the foundational principles of historical materialism. Some descriptions may evoke a nostalgic smile; such as references to the railroad shortening communication between workers from days to hours. Today, the internet allows us to communicate instantly. Yet it also facilitates misinformation and fake news. It has become a tool for post-truth, limiting and manipulating the critical consciousness of the working class.

The first Spanish translation of *The Communist Manifesto* was published between 1871 and 1873 by *El Emancipador*, a Marxist newspaper in Madrid. At the same time, the young José Martí had just arrived in Spain, deported for his political views and sentenced to forced labor in Havana. He lived and studied in Madrid and Zaragoza until 1874. Did he read the Manifesto? There is no conclusive evidence either way. However, we know he was a voracious reader, always seeking texts that aligned with his ideal of emancipation.

Also present in Madrid in 1871 was the French-Cuban Paul Lafargue, Marx's disciple and son-in-law, who had fled France after the fall of the Paris Commune. Martí made no direct comment on those events in his writings or correspondence. His priority was Cuban independence and the colonial relationship with Spain. At the time, all major information sources were hostile to the Paris Commune. A poet provides another possible explanation. Fina García Marruz once wrote that no one has connected Martí's rejection of the Commune with his concern over premature uprisings.

Returning to the Manifesto, in describing the rise of capitalism, Marx and Engels wrote:

*"The bourgeoisie... compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production. It compels them to introduce what it*

*calls civilization, to become bourgeois themselves. In a word, it creates a world after its own image."*

They later added:

*"Just as it has made the country dependent on the town, it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones, peasant nations on bourgeois nations, the East on the West."*

Here we find two concepts that would become central to anti-colonial thought: civilization and barbarism. These terms appear in this early work by Marx and Engels. I would like to highlight a detail. Although in some passages the word "civilization" seems to be used in an absolute and bourgeois sense, in the quote above the authors use the phrase "what it calls civilization."

Now let us consider Martí, who viewed the world from a different perspective, from that of the colonized and the so-called Third World. In 1884, Martí wrote in response to U.S. students who tried to justify imperial conquest on the grounds that

*"civilization, which is the common term for the current state of European man, has a natural right to seize the lands of barbarism, which is the term those who desire foreign lands apply to the current state of any man not from Europe or European America."*

By "European man," Martí clearly referred to the bourgeois class. He went on to write powerful lines about England's colonization of Egypt. These lines still resonate today and could easily apply to current imperialist discourse and to the Palestinian struggle. He wrote:

*"as if, man for man, and heart for heart, a tyrant of the Irish or a cannoneer of the sepoys were worth more than one of those prudent, loving, and selfless Arabs, who, undeterred by defeat or outnumbered, defend their native land with faith in Allah, a lance in each hand and a pistol between their teeth."*

Martí takes the argument further, defending the idea that Latin America can develop its own path to modernity without copying the United States. He states that *"natural men have defeated artificial*

*scholars,”* and that “the native mestizo has defeated the exotic Creole.” For Martí, the battle was not between civilization and barbarism, but between false scholarship and authentic identity. In this, I would even suggest that Martí was not only responding to figures like Sarmiento, but also offering an indirect critique of Marx. Martí, being revolutionary by nature, speaks in terms of victory already won, even when the goal had not yet been achieved, because his writing does not merely describe reality—it builds it.

The Manifesto may be confusing to some readers if they do not understand that Marx was not predicting immediate developments. His gaze was always fixed on the horizon of the communist ideal. He described the great trends of history, not the steps of the next day. This quality connects Martí, Marx, and Fidel Castro. Their historical contexts were different, but their approach was the same. All three were fundamentally revolutionary. Nothing is more demobilizing than focusing only on what seems immediately possible.

Marx called for the working class to take political power, not to dominate others, but to liberate all—including the exploiters. The distorted experiences of failed socialist projects clouded this vision. In their wake, reactionary forces fragmented social demands and isolated movements from one another. Today, we must recover a unifying vision. There will be no true liberation for any group without the emancipation of society as a whole. That is the spirit behind the call: *Workers of the world, unite!*

A new specter is haunting the world today, one of a very different kind: fascism. It is the violent reaction of a bourgeoisie, particularly in the West, that is losing its global dominance. We are once again faced with a stark choice: socialism or barbarism. This time, it is capitalism that leads us toward barbarism, with no clear alternative for its survival. After the decline of “*real socialism*,” we must find our way back to the path of socialism. Any “moderate” or cosmetic solution will not only be ineffective but self-destructive. Fascism will only be defeated by addressing the root causes of exploitation. This requires the radical commitment of the most revolutionary forces, committed to building a better world without classes and without oppression—even if that means risking everything.

Let these words serve as an invitation to read the volume *Revolutionary Thought: Three Classic Texts*. It brings together three essential thinkers whose influence endures. In Fidel Castro, the dialectical unity of Martí and Marx takes form. This is the strength and continued relevance of the Cuban Revolution.

**Translated by Sergio A. Paneque Díaz / CubaSí Translation Staff**

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