

Revisiting the Communist Manifesto - 150 years after

Monday 22 August 2011, by [PHELPS Christopher](#) (Date first published: 1 January 1998).

THE EXPERIENCE OF reading the *Communist Manifesto* is to Marxists what the experience of watching “Casablanca” is for movie buffs. Let us call it the surprise of the familiar.

The pulse quickens upon coming across long-familiar lines with the realization that here, right here, is where a certain phrase first appeared! (“Here’s looking at you, kid,” “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,” “We’ll always have Paris.”) Then, too, there are surprising absences, the clichés one half-expects that never quite materialize.. (“Play it, Sam,” runs the line in the film, never “Play it again, Sam.”) The dual sensations of vindicated reputation and rediscovered authenticity can be heady, indeed.

This year many socialists—and many others as well, including perhaps not a few who only a few years ago were beguiled by talk of an “end of history”—will re-experience those sensations as they revisit the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, a document which has now reached the august age of 150 years. Few writings have withstood the test of time as well.

To commemorate this anniversary and assess the *Manifesto*’s enduring meaning, we selected telling and time-tested phrases from the Manifesto, arranged in topical sets, and paired each passage with a writer we thought particularly qualified to address the issue posed.

The result, as we hope readers will agree, is a spirited, compelling demonstration of the enduring relevance of Marxism after 150 years, conducted without piety or self-satisfaction. In the critical tradition of this periodical, we encouraged contributors to use the *Manifesto*’s anniversary as a chance for us, as socialists, to ask ourselves the tough questions, the ones our tradition must find ways to answer at the end of the twentieth century should we ever hope to achieve “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”

We find the resulting symposium quite compelling. We offer it in the understanding that the aim of studying history, from the Marxist standpoint, is to better enable us to comprehend the present and change the world—and not to cultivate nostalgic sentimentalities, as time goes by.

Christopher Phelps

See the following contributions:

Ellen Meiksins Wood, [Politics and the Communist Manifesto—Part 1 - On class struggles under capitalism](#) (ESSF, article 22649).

Johanna Brenner and Bill Resnick, [Politics of the Communist Manifesto—Part 2 - How to fight for reforms?](#) (ESSF, article 22650).

David Finkel, [Politics and the Communist Manifesto—Part 3 - On parties, unions, bureaucracies](#) (ESSF, article 22651).

Nancy Holmstrom, [Politics and the Communist Manifesto—Part 4 - On class power in the transition](#) (ESSF, article 22652).

Staughton Lynd, [History, Culture and the Communist Manifesto—Part 1 - On class struggle and history](#) (ESSF, article 22653).

Eleni Varikas, [History, Culture and the Communist Manifesto—Part 2 - On emancipation](#) (ESSF, article 22648).

Howard Brick, [History, Culture and the Communist Manifesto—Part 3 - On ideology and historical ideas](#) (ESSF, article 22654).

Anwar Shaikh, [Economics and the Communist Manifesto—Part 1 - A powerful and evolving analysis of the nature of capitalism](#) (ESSF, article 22655).

Jane Slaughter, [Economics and the Communist Manifesto—Part 2 - On lean production and computers](#) (ESSF, article 22656).

Robin D.G. Kelley, [Race and the Communist Manifesto](#) (ESSF, article 22657).

John Bellamy Foster, [Nature and the Communist Manifesto](#) (ESSF, article 22658).

Stephanie Coontz, [Gender and the Communist Manifesto](#) (ESSF, article 22462).

P.S.

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