

The use of  
sweatshop labor and  
the communist  
manifesto: ideas that  
are topical to...

[Business](#), [Work](#)



In this essay, I will be looking at the use of sweatshop labor through the critical perspective of the communist manifesto, as big transnational companies move production to the developing world in order to maximize profits. This allows these companies to cut costs by paying lower wages and enforcing looser health and safety regulations in countries where the laws are far less stringent. Here I will raise questions as to whether the use of this labor is merely exploitation or if it betters the lives of workers through providing stable employment. Secondly, I will be exploring the manifestos claim of an “inevitable” (Terrell, 2015) revolution and the overthrowing of the capitalist system, through looking at the 2011 riots. I will be updating the ideas in the manifesto to try and establish if these riots could be the start of the proletarian revolution predicted.

The communist manifesto identifies that for the bourgeoisie to survive they must continually change and improve the ways they produce goods (Terrell, 2015). During the time in which the manifesto was written the mode of production had been revolutionized by machine and steam power, which allowed the bourgeoisie to move from small-scale manufacture to large scale manufacture. This change was made because the old modes of production could no longer satisfy the increasing demand for goods (Terrell, 2015). A new change has taken place in the contemporary mode of production; the moving of the production process to the third world and the increasing use of sweatshop labor. This allows the bourgeoisie to “get a foothold everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere” (Terrell, 2015). This has helped to create a global division of labor between the developing world and the west, in which poorer regions are expected to take up labor-

intensive manufacturing and paid low wages for their efforts (Mezzadri, 2017: 16). These changes allow big transnational companies (the modern bourgeoisie) to maximize profits by cutting costs, through the exploitation of the poor in the developing world. The bourgeoisie can pay even lower wages and force employees to work in dangerous and cramped conditions, due to the more lenient laws in the developing world. As the communist manifesto identified, the bourgeoisie will only pay enough for its workers to survive in order to continue work and reproduce future generations of the workforce (Terrell, 2015) Wages can be as low as only \$68 a month in Bangladesh and is the world's second-largest clothing exporter (Mezzadri, 2017: 18).

Although the living costs are lower in Bangladesh, this is still a very small monthly wage, particularly when looking at the huge annual income of companies known to use sweatshop labor. According to the BBC, Primark brought in revenues of £7. 05 Billion between September 2016 and 2017 (BBC, 2017) but is a company known to use sweatshop labor.

Today almost all our garments are made in other countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. These clothes are sold for extremely cheap prices in most of our regular high street stores. Along with being cheap, these garments are fast-changing which has led to the emergence of fast fashion (Mezzadri, 2017: 16). The continual change in these fashions allows for the bourgeoisie (transnational cooperation) to boost sales and profits by creating ever-changing trends. This means that people must frequently purchase new clothes to stay up to date, fulfilling the bourgeoisie's " need for a constantly expanding outlet for their products" (Terrell, 2015). The

countries of origin in which these garments come from are often de-valued through us being given very little information from where they come from. This causes us to view these countries in terms of one vague area, rather than as individual places filled with individual people (Mezzadri, 2017: 17). The de-humanization of these places and people reflect the ideas in the manifesto people are only seen in terms of their “ exchange-value'(Terrell, 2015) rather than personal worth in a capitalist society (Terrell, 2015). The manifesto argues that viewing people in this manner leads to “ unashamed, direct, brutal exploitation” (Terrell, 2015) of workers. This can be seen in the virtually non-existent safety precautions in many of these factories, such as in the tragic case of the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013. 1, 135 people died after five garment factories fell due to poor building quality and safety checks (Mezzadri, 2017: 18). The level of exploitation here is extreme, as the lives of workers are considered as of secondary importance to the need to cut costs and make profits. This de-valuing and de-humanization of workers is highlighted even further when considering that some companies refused to pay compensation to the victims. It was only when activists in 2015 organized marches in London that the compensation demands were met (Mezzadri, 2017: 19) showing that they feel more strongly about retaining relatively small amounts of money than they felt guilt for the victims.

On the other hand, there are some ways in which the application of the communist manifesto to the issue of sweatshop labor is not completely successful. As I have identified, the communist manifesto's critical purchase on the issue of sweatshop labor would be negative, viewing it as a wholly

exploitative and dehumanizing process. However, it can be argued that this isn't always true. Some critics suggest that work in these factories provides people with valuable employment which is imperative to their livelihoods and overall quality of life. Some economists argue that although the wages in these factories are low, the positive impact of these industries on these countries' economies will eventually lead to an increase in wages overall. They also argue that work in factories is an improvement in alternative work such as agriculture, in which they would not be paid a steady wage and is supposedly more labor-intensive (Blattman and Dercon, 2017). From this perspective, the moving of production to the developing world may not always be "brutal exploitation" (Terrell, 2015) but the chance to improve their lives through the opportunity to work. However, it is still important to note that the low wages and poor conditions are still needlessly inflicted upon them from their billionaire bourgeoisie bosses. The communist manifesto states that the workers "live only so long as they find work" (Terrell, 2015) which is particularly true in the developing world, whereby most countries have little or no welfare systems. The poverty in which the workers' experience forces them to take up these poorly paid, labor-intensive, and often dangerous jobs as not having employment is not an option. This is reflected in the manifesto's argument that capitalism "has left intact no other bond between one man and another than naked self-interest, unfeeling 'hard cash'" (Terrell, 2015). The capitalist's prey on their workers lacks opportunities as they realize they have no alternatives.

The communist manifesto argues that the bourgeoisie will be the makers of their own doom. The workers will eventually unite and overthrow the capitalist system, as the conditions, they are living in and the alienation they are experiencing can no longer be ignored (Terrell, 2015). The extent to which this prediction can be translated into the modern-day can be supported but is also problematic. The manifesto states “ Here and there the struggle breaks out into riots” (Terrell, 2015). This statement is something that is resonant with recent events; The 2011 riots. The riots started in London and spread throughout Britain’s major cities. Some have described these events as being the most significant rioting of this generation. Major damage was caused including; 5 fatalities, injuries to both the public and the police, and tens of millions of pounds worth of property damage. The riots were thought to have been started after the police shooting of Mark Dugan and the poor handling of subsequent protests (Newburn, 2015). According to Bauman (2011) the riots represent the anger the working classes are experiencing at not having the means to consume desired goods. He argues that in the past a similar division between the needy and the fulfilled existed, but this was based around food and not consumer goods. The anger these people are experiencing stems from the importance of material goods in shaping our identities and status in a capitalist society (Bauman, 2011). This is illustrated further in an interview with two looters, who claim that the riots were the fault of the government and that they had purposefully attacked businesses in order to show the rich that they can behave as they please (BBC, 2011). Another looter describes her participation in the looting of a Debenhams store as being like Christmas, only here they could grab

anything they desired (Topping and Bawdon, 2011). The linking of the criminal act of looting to an international holiday marked by joy, purity, and sacredness suggests deep levels of gratification at the chance to access these goods.

On the other hand, as outlined by Jacques and Brun (2000) Capitalist systems have more power today and socialist systems less – such as with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many developing countries aspire to become more like the west (Hersh and Brun, 2000: 105). This could suggest that capitalist systems are the preferred model of society worldwide. This counteracts claims in the manifesto, that suggest that communism was a danger looming over the capitalist way of life. This has hardly become a reality when considering that the world is more capitalist than it has ever been before (Jacques and Brun, 2000: 105) over one hundred years later. When considering this, the riots of 2011 could be seen as a mere act of greed and civil disorder without any true political motivation – particularly when considering that little action has been taken by these people since. The argument that the riots had little ‘real’ political motivation can be shown in looters laying the blame on the government (BBC, 2011) but giving no real justification as to why. Some critics pointed to the capitalistic mentality of greedily grabbing whatever you can to boost your ego as central to the looter’s motivations rather than social and economic inequalities (in Newburn, 2017). However, when considering that these riots have been set apart from others due to their focus on looting and therefore consumerism (in Newburn, 2017) it is indicative of a reaction from the working classes

against their inability to participate in the owning of desirable consumer goods. Arguably these riots could be the first signs of the awakening of the working classes rather than as having immediate revolutionary potential.

In conclusion, the two contemporary political issues I have explored suggest that the ideas in the manifesto are still relevant today with the conditions under which Marx originally wrote the manifesto still being present (Jacques and Brun, 2000: 105). The use of sweatshop labor undoubtedly shows the continuing importance of maximizing profit over offering a decent quality of life for fellow human beings. Although some critics may suggest that the use of sweatshop labor is not all bad as it provides jobs, the fact that the millionaire bourgeoisie knowingly pays their impoverished workers' such small wages is resonant with the "brutal" (Terrell, 2015) exploitation referenced in the manifesto. The 2011 riots were the first riots to be characterized by consumerism suggesting that either the working class is finally beginning to shed their "chains" (Terrell, 2015) or further evidence of the negative effects of a capitalist system on society's most disadvantaged.