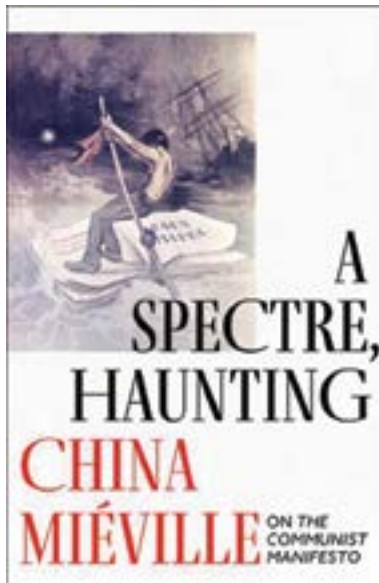


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A Spectre, Haunting: On the Communist Manifesto

By China Miéville

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310 pages

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Reviewed by Alexandra Pierce

This is an urgent, thorough and timely book that explores the Communist Manifesto in its own historical context, in the critical context of the past 150 years, and in our own current context. I would go so far as to say that for anyone teaching about communism in history, this is a vital addition to your library.

Miéville makes no claim for this to be an 'exhaustive evaluation of the Manifesto or its arguments' (p. 4). Instead, he aims for it to be 'a short introduction to an indispensable text' (p. 4).

The introduction lays out the view of Marx and Engels on the global situation—poverty, starvation, political issues around the world, and then finally the pandemic. Chapter 1 explains the context of the Manifesto as a genre, something that often seems to be ignored when discussing the text—it doesn't exist in a vacuum as a piece of writing as there were antecedents and tradition, even if Marx and Engels upended some of those. Chapter 2 gives the historical context of Marx and Engels and the text itself. In Chapter 4, Miéville explores some of the most significant claims that the Manifesto makes, and Chapter 5 deals with some of the critical commentary around the text. Finally—and what contributes to the urgency of the book—Miéville spends Chapter 6 exploring what the Manifesto can bring to readers today: how it can inspire, challenge, enrage and provoke, and whether it can or should be a guide for twenty-first century citizens.

That's not the end of the book: pages 188–246 consist of an English translation of the Communist Manifesto, and the prefaces to several different editions. In this way, Miéville is making sure that the reader can double-check his work. Every paragraph is numbered, and any quote from the text is given the

appropriate reference. I found this to be a particularly honest way of approaching such a controversial topic.

Miéville is no stranger to the idea of that his position is controversial. He wrote his PhD on Marxism and international law, and has been a member of various socialist organisations.

He claims in the introduction that when he presents his own views, he has tried 'to do so in ways that will allow readers of various opinions to find value in the discussions ... nowhere do I pretend to be dispassionate or neutral' (p. 7). To a large degree he has succeeded.

Miéville makes no claims that the Manifesto is perfect, and indeed agrees with some of the criticisms aimed at it over the decades. What he does claim, though, is that its analysis can help readers to understand capitalism, and its adaptability, and perhaps ways that those things can be challenged (and why they should be), particularly in view of the coming climate catastrophe.

This is an excellent work for teachers of the Russian and Chinese revolutions, and the Cold War. It's one of the best explanations of the Manifesto that I've come across. It would also be invaluable for Politics teachers in thinking about modern political challenges, especially if the Manifesto leaves you cold because Miéville's explanations are so clearly presented.