

China Mieville on Why Capitalism Deserves Our Burning Hatred

BY

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If you feel a burning hatred toward our unjust social order, writes China Mieville, don't run from it. Such hate for a system that immiserates vast swaths of humanity is just and necessary.

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We have no reason to succumb to the complex comfort of despair, a retreat to lugubriousness by which failure is foreordained. But to stress the repeated failures of the Left is a necessary corrective, given its history of boosterism and bullshit, and to stress quite how appalling and terrible these days are, even if we can also find in them hope. To take the liberal approach and see Boris Johnson, Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi, Rodrigo Duterte, Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi and his aftermaths, violent and intricate “conspiracism,” the rise of the alt right, the growing volubility of racism and fascism, as *deviations*, is exoneration of the system of which they are expressions. Trump is gone, but Trumpism remains strong.

But even for all this, and for the recent defeat and smearing of left movements in the UK and US, a cause of profound depression and demoralization on the Left, this has also been a moment of

unprecedented insurgency in American cities (and elsewhere). History, and the present, are up for debate.

Capitalism cannot exist without relentless punishment of those who transgress its often petty and heartless prohibitions, and indeed of those the punishment of whom it deems functional to its survival, irrespective of their notional “transgression.” It increasingly deploys not just bureaucratic repression but an invested, overt, supererogatory sadism. There are countless ghastly examples of the rehabilitation and celebration of cruelty, in the carceral sphere, in politics and culture. Spectacles like this aren’t new, but they have not always been so “unabashed,” as Philip Mirowski puts it, “made to seem so unexceptional” — and they are not only distraction but part of “teaching techniques optimised to reinforce the neoliberal self.”

Such social sadisms have always been opposed and fought over, and officially disavowed — particularly “at home,” rather than where deployed against subjects of colonial rule — by structures that depict themselves as rational and just, even merciful. That’s changing.

This is a system that thrives on and encourages such sadism, despair, and disempowerment. Alongside which are thrown up species of authoritarian notional “happiness,” an obligatory drab “enjoyment” of life, a ruthless insistence on cheerfulness, such as Barbara Ehrenreich describes in her book *Smile or Die*. Such mandatory positivity is not the opposite, but the co-constitutive other, of such miseries. This bullying is a version of what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism,” including on the Left: no judicious earned hope but a browbeating insistence on the necessity of positive thinking, at the cost not only of emotional autonomy but the inevitable crash when the world fails to live up to such strictures.

In a social system of mass cruelty, which celebrates only such miserable, commodified, and ultimately impoverishing “pleasures,” it’s perfectly understandable that the Left should be eager to stress a different kind and depth of positive emotion, to find potential radical opposition in socially destabilizing infections of *joy*, as an iteration of the opposite of sadism. To see in *love* a shattering, reconfiguring event, a key revolutionary motivation.

After all, the ethics underpinning socialism, says Terry Eagleton in his wonderful *Why Marx Was Right*, resolves a contradiction of liberalism “in which your freedom may flourish only at the expense of mine,” as “[o]nly through others can we finally come into our own,” which “means an enrichment of individual freedom, not a diminishing of it. It is hard to think of a finer ethics. On a personal level, it is known as love.”

This sense, to love, of a certain political prefiguration, has inspired radicals for a century. In her seminal “Make Way for Winged Eros,” the great revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai described love as “a

profoundly social emotion,” insisted that “[f]or a social system to be built on solidarity and cooperation it is essential that people should be capable of love,” and encouraged education to that end. How can we not, to quote the title of one fascinating and provocative recent book, consider “the communism of love?” Be drawn by its claim that “[w]hat is called ‘love’ by the best thinkers who have approached the subject is the beating heart of communism?”

By all means let us take love seriously.

But we must take our enemies seriously, too, and learn from them. In what is an epoch of great hate. What aspects of the *Communist Manifesto* does such barbarism bring into sharp focus?

In 1989, Donald Trump suggested that “maybe hate is what we need if we’re going to get something done.” His hatred was then, and remains, a vicious deployment of racist class spite: a demand for the judicial murder of the Central Park Five, black teenagers falsely accused of rape.

The concrete content of this hate is everything against which we should stand. But how best to counter hate? Is such hate as this itself not worthy of hatred?

Trump is shrewd. If not his initial aim, his hate certainly got something done. Perhaps, negatively inspired, our own hate should get something *else* done, and urgently. Something very different. The hatred of such systemic hate.

Hatred of Domination Is Just

The philosopher and Anglican priest Steven Shakespeare warns that a focus on hate as anything other than a force to be rejected is “fraught,” and “dangerous territory.” How could it be otherwise? Hatred, after all, is an emotion that can short-circuit thought and analysis, can segue into violence, and not necessarily with any discrimination.

But, duly careful, Shakespeare then attempts exactly the focus about which he warns, precisely to be “more discriminatory about hate, where it comes from, where it should be directed, and how it gets captured for the purposes of others.” And a key point he makes is that hatred “which assumes no founding truth or harmony, but . . . knows itself to be against the dominating other” is “a constituent part of the singularity of every created being.”

The claim, then, in the face of human history, is that hatred, particularly by the oppressed, is *inevitable*.

This isn't to say that it's inevitable that all people, even all oppressed people, will experience hate. It's to claim that, hate being neither contingent nor alien to the human soul, some, likely many, will. That, particularly in the contexts of societies that pit people against each other individually and en masse, hate will certainly exist. People will hate. As many of us know personally.

Hate is part of humanity. There's no guarantee of the direction of such inevitable hate, of course. It can be internalized, into the deadening self-hatred that, under capitalism, is so widespread. So often so validated by the system itself. Who, ground down by capitalism, does not feel, in the closing words of Rae Armantrout's poem "Hate," that "[t]he market hates you / even more / than you hate yourself"?

Hate can be externalized, without any justice: it has often been turned against those who least deserve it. But, though it has become a cliché, Marx's favorite maxim is richly pertinent here: *Nihil humani a me alienum puto* — nothing human is alien to me. It's hardly productive to pathologize hate per se, not least when it's natural that it arises, let alone to make it cause for shame.

Sophie Lewis puts the point with customary trenchant clarity. "Hate is almost never talked about as appropriate, healthy, or necessary in liberal-democratic society. For conservatives, liberals, and socialists alike, hate itself is the thing to reject, uproot, defeat, and cast out of the soul. Yet anti-hate ideology doesn't seem to involve targeting its root causes and points of production, nor does it address the inevitability of or the demand — the need — for hate in a class society." To raise this issue, not only of the existence of hatred but, for some at least, of its potential rigorous necessity, is, to put it in Kenneth Surin's terms, what lies behind "deploying a deliberate hate as a rational category."

Hate should never be trusted, nor treated as safe, nor celebrated for its own sake. But, inevitable, it should not be ignored. Nor is it automatically undeserved. Nor, perhaps, can we do without it, not if we are to remain human, in a hateful epoch that pathologizes radical hate and encourages outrage fatigue.

And nor is careful hate necessarily an enemy of liberation. It might be its ally.

In 1837, membership of the radical left group of the great pre-Marxian socialist Auguste Blanqui, known as the "Seasons," made such socially informed hate central. Standing against the degradation of the revolutionary tradition, for freedom, acolytes swore an oath: "In the name of the Republic, I swear eternal hatred to all kings, aristocrats and all oppressors of humanity."

In 1889, the radical Australian poet Francis Adams wrote that he had destroyed his health in the pursuit of working-class struggle in London. “It seemed a failure,” he wrote. “But I never despaired, or saw cause to despair. There was a splendid foundation of hate there. With hate, all things are possible.”

In 1957, Dorothy Counts desegregated a school in North Carolina. Writing of the photograph of her walking past the vicious jeering mob of demonstrators, James Baldwin wrote that “[i]t made me furious. It filled me with both hatred and pity.” The latter for Counts; the former for what he saw in the faces of her attackers. It would be an astonishing and priggish piety to suggest that hatred such as this was unbecoming, or that it did not work for emancipation.

Crucially, as Francis Adams wrote, *all* things are possible with hate — not only good things. That’s the danger. But some good things, surely, in terms, for example, of activist vigor. Raging, too, certainly, but raging *against* something, wishing its eradication. The very absence of a critical mass of hatred may militate against resistance: Walter Benjamin, in his extraordinary, prophetic, controversial 1940 essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” took social democracy, as opposed to militant socialism, to task for its focus on the future and on the working class as “redeemer,” thus actively weakening that class by directing its eyes away from the iniquities of the past and present, to “forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice.” It was in part in this hatred that he thought there might be strength.

And hate may help not only with strength but intellectual rigor, and of analysis, too. The very flat abstractions of capital can generate their own seemingly implacable logic, against which an emotionally invested, a *hating* contrary eye, might prove necessary not only ethically but epistemologically.

“What will never function is the cold logic of reason,” Mario Tronti writes, “when it is not moved by class hatred.” Because “knowledge is connected to the struggle. Whoever has true hatred has truly understood.” Tronti goes so far as to describe a radical antinomianism, that is, opposition to “the entire world of bourgeois society, as well as deadly class hatred against it” as “the simplest form of Marx’s working-class science.” Even in Marx’s early political writings, from 1848–9, wrong as they were in various particulars, Tronti finds “a clear-sightedness in foreseeing future development such as only class hatred could provide.”

Class hatred. Hatred by a social force, of an opposing social force, of that “dominating other” Steven Shakespeare identifies. Such a hate is just, indicated and necessary: “not a personal, psychological or pathological hate, but a radical structural hate for what the world has become.”

Hatred and the *Manifesto*

Such radical structural hate, carefully deployed, might even give productive shape to the more protean forms of hate that are also inevitable, and more dangerous. “The proposed melding here of hate with a strategic logic is essential if hate is not to descend into rage or a mindless apocalypticism.” Hate will arise, and though shame should not attach to it, it must be urgently directed. “*Radical* hate,” in Mike Neary’s description, “is the critical concept on which absolute negativity” — that antinomian rupture — “is based.”

What has all this to do with the *Manifesto*? Even so subtle and hate-curious a Marxologist as Tronti focuses on and finds his material in other of Marx’s writings. But those texts precisely come *after* the *Manifesto*, and can be seen in part as responses to it and to its failures, the failures of its prophecies, its hopes. The class hatred those later writings express doesn’t emerge out of nowhere.

In the rhetoric of the *Manifesto* itself, Haig Bosmajian sees “not only attempts to arouse anger . . . but . . . to arouse hatred which is directed not only against an individual, but also against a class.” Quoting Aristotle that where anger provokes a desire for revenge, “hatred wishes its object not to exist,” for Bosmajian Marx’s “goal was to arouse his listeners to that state in which they would wish the bourgeoisie eradicated.”

This is ambiguous: the point for Marx and Engels isn’t the “eradication” of individuals, but of the bourgeoisie *as a class* — which is to say, of capitalism. To suggest that the text evokes “hatred” of bourgeois individuals is to misrepresent the ambivalence in its passages, as well as its focus on the class system of capitalism. To go further and claim, as does Leo Kuper, that the “thoroughgoing dehumanization of the bourgeoisie” has “relevance” for the problem of *genocide*, implying a teleology of “the inevitable violent extinction of a dehumanized class of people” is absurd.

On the one hand, this is simply to deploy the question-begging liberal nostrum that Stalin is the inevitable outcome and end of Marxism, and is thus not particularly interesting or surprising. It should, of course, be acknowledged that there are those who have used such arguments as are in the *Manifesto* to commit appalling acts.

Still, though, describing this imaginary terror sententiously as one meted out on the basis of guilt ascribed to people “for what they are, rather than for what they do” is precisely wrong. In the *Manifesto*, in Marxism in general, the relation between classes is definitionally not on the basis of static, given

identities, but relations, which include things done. And the “eradication” necessary is of those relations, not of specific people.

The *Manifesto* is clear: “To be a capitalist is to have not only a purely personal but a social position in production.” And not by essence of self, either, as the *Manifesto*’s description of class renegacy among some of the bourgeoisie attests, but by virtue of taking “positions that reflect tendencies, a tendency toward capital concentration and a tendency toward dependency and immiseration,” in Jodi Dean’s gloss — that is to say, actively perpetuating these structures and dynamics. It’s precisely the pressing need for rupture in the *Manifesto* that expresses what radical hatred it contains.

But in any case, in fact, for all their magnificent spleen against the system, Marx and Engels were too generous in their eulogy to its transformation and energetic properties, and to the bourgeoisie itself, as well as about the likelihood of its collapse. The *Manifesto* is a call to arms, but those real traces of a sense of inevitable collapse pull against that drive to *eradicate* the system. The *Manifesto* hopes to be a “swan song” of the system, but it is, too, a “hymn to the glory of capitalist modernity.” “Never, I repeat, and in particular by no modern defender of the bourgeois civilization has anything like this been penned, never has a brief been composed on behalf of the business class from so profound and so wide a comprehension of what its achievement is and of what it means to humanity.” If this, from the conservative economist Joseph Schumpeter, is an exaggeration, it isn’t by much. The *Manifesto*, for all its fire, its anger and indignation, admires capitalism and bourgeois society and the bourgeoisie. It admires the bourgeois class too much.

It’s telling that Gareth Stedman Jones, a relentlessly disillusioned biographer of Marx, describes the tone of the *Manifesto*’s most well-known passage as one of “playful sadism.” One might well contest the noun, but not the adjective. And to be playful, to play, implies a playmate. The very scintillation and swaggering provocation that makes the *Manifesto* so brilliant implies, for all its antagonism, something ludic, that pulls against any eliminationist hatred in the text.

This is not to imply that the *Manifesto* is hate-free. It admires the bourgeoisie, plays roughly with them, and hates them, too, no doubt. Of course, hatred of the system is clear throughout. But at its most combative, how hard does it hate the bourgeoisie as a class? The most antagonistic section is paragraph 2.15 to 2.67, wherein the bourgeoisie are argued with directly. That switch to second person locates what hatred there is in, or at least inextricable from, the admiration. 2.34 implies that they are lazy; 2.38 selfish; 2.45–2.51 accuses them of hypocrisy. These are about all, as far as direct attacks go. And the sincere fury here sits atop that play, the enjoyment of winning an argument, rhetorical roughhousing.

But is the direct scorn here greater than in the ferocious attacks on various left-wing opponents? If anything, the palpable vituperation against, say, the True Socialists, is greater, precisely because it has none of that ambivalence in attitude that the *Manifesto* has towards the bourgeoisie.

To borrow a phrase from Neary, in another context, the *Communist Manifesto*'s "negativity is not negative enough." It does not hate enough. Against the rolling eyes of the know-all cynic, we should retain our shock at those litanies of iniquity capitalism throws up. That they provoke in us an appropriate, human, humane response, the fury of solidarity, the loathing of such unnecessary suffering.

Who would we be not to hate this system, and its partisans? If we don't, the hate of those who hate on its behalf will not ebb. "[T]here's a splendid foundation of hate today, too — and if we don't build something positive from it, the edifices that will inevitably emerge will be very ugly indeed." We should feel hate beyond words, and bring it to bear. This is a system that, whatever else, deserves implacable hatred for its countless and escalating cruelties.

The ruling class needs the working class. Its various fantasies of getting rid of them can only *be* fantasies, because as a class it has no power without those beneath it. Thus wider ruling-class contempt for the working class ("chavs"), thus class loathing, thus social sadism, thus the constant entitlement from the ruling class, that sense that they are special and that rules don't apply, thus the deranged eulogizing of cruelty and inequality. Vile as all this is, what it is not is *hate*, certainly not Aristotelian hate — because its object absolutely cannot be eradicated.

For the working class, the situation is different. The eradication of the bourgeoisie *as a class* is the eradication of bourgeois rule, of capitalism, of exploitation, of the boot on the neck of humanity. This is why the working class doesn't need sadism, nor even revenge—and why it not only can, but must, hate. It must hate its class enemy, and capitalism itself.

Hatred of the Forces That Oppress Humanity

There is a model for a better hatred in one of the key texts from which the *Manifesto* was born: Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Hate, of the most class-rigorous kind, recurs and recurs repeatedly, runs through that unendingly shocked and blistering work. It recognizes in the bourgeoisie, for its part, "hatred towards these associations" of the working class, of course: those

associations the bourgeoisie could certainly do with eradicating. But not only does Engels not shy from the hate of the working class for its oppressors in turn, but he repeatedly invokes it, and more.

He sees it as necessary and central to working-class politics. Workers, for Engels, “shall live like human beings, shall think and feel like men [sic]” “only under glowing hatred towards their oppressors, and towards that order of things which places them in such a position, which degrades them to machines.” Hatred is necessary for dignity, which means for political agency. He doesn’t celebrate hate *tout court*, all too aware of the dangers of “hatred wrought to the pitch of despair” and manifesting in individual attacks by workers on capitalists.

“Class hatred,” by contrast, is “the only moral incentive by which the worker can be brought nearer the goal.” This stands in direct opposition to individualized hatred: “in proportion as the proletarian absorbs socialistic and communistic elements, will the revolution diminish in bloodshed, revenge, and savagery . . . [I]t does not occur to any Communist to wish to revenge himself upon individuals.”

It would admittedly be a prim and pious socialism which failed at least to empathize with individualized hate, or simply denounced it wholesale as an ethical failure. This is particularly so in our modern epoch, when sadism and trolling have become central to political method, especially among the ruling class. It would take an unreasonable amount of saintliness for no one on the Left to feel any hate for, say, hedge fund founder, pharmaceuticals CEO, and convicted fraudster Martin Shkreli, for example, not only because of his ostentatious profiteering from human misery, but given his repeated, performative, stringent efforts precisely to be hated. And, of course, there’s the race-baiting, disability-mocking, sexual-assault-celebrating Trump.

The point, though, is that to fully and uncritically surrender to such agon against individuals is to invite one’s own ethical degeneration; to implicitly give a pass to those others in the ruling class more inclined to decorously veil the misery from which they profit; and to lose focus on the system of which such turpitudinous figures are symptoms. Which is to risk exonerating it.

The history of the revolutionary movement is, among other things, a history of organized radicals attempting to *restrain* individualized class hate. Hatred must be class hatred, with “communistic ideas,” precisely to obviate “the present bitterness.” But that *class* hate is glowing and must glow, and only by “cherishing the most glowing hatred,” in Engels’s vivid formulation, can those at the sharp end of history keep self-respect alive. Herein lies the “purity” of which the radical journalist Alexander Cockburn enquired when he famously asked of his interns, “Is your hate pure?” This is a political iteration of the תַּכְלִית שִׂנְאָה, the *taklit sinah*, the “utmost” or “perfect hatred” of the Psalms for those who rise up against the Lord — that is to say, to translate into political eschatology, the enemies of justice. Psalm 139:22: “I hate them with a perfect hatred.”

We must hate harder than did the *Manifesto*, for the sake of humanity. Such class hate is constitutive with and inextricable from solidarity, the drive for human liberty, for the full development of the human, the ethic of emancipation implicit throughout the *Manifesto* and beyond. We should hate this world, with and through and beyond and even more than does the *Manifesto*. We should hate this hateful and hating and hatemongering system of cruelty, that exhausts and withers and kills us, that stunts our care, makes it so embattled and constrained and local in its scale and effects, where we have the capacity to be greater.

Hate is not and cannot be the only or main drive to renewal. That would be deeply dangerous. We should neither celebrate nor trust our hate. But nor should we deny it. It's not our enemy, and we cannot do without it. "At the risk of seeming ridiculous," said Che Guevara, "let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love." It's for the sake of love that, reading it today, we must hate more and better than even the *Communist Manifesto* knew how.

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China Miéville is the author of *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* as well as *This Census-Taker*, *Three Moments of an Explosion*, *Railsea*, *Embassytown*, *Kraken*, *The City & The City*, and *Perdido Street Station*. His works have won the World Fantasy Award, the Hugo Award, and the Arthur C. Clarke Award (three times). He lives and works in London.

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