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“THE problem we have is that we are headed towards communism. We are beyond socialism.” This warning comes not from 19th-century Europe but from 21st-century America. Utter nonsense? Obviously, although perhaps unfortunately.

These words were uttered by the famously intellectual Donald Trump, but he is by no means a soloist in his obnoxious milieu. It has become fairly commonplace, particularly among US Republicans, to deride anything seen as even mildly progressive as either communism or a pathway to a slippery slope.

Their bête noires range from corporations offering token nods to gender or racial equality to educational institutions teaching a more nuanced version of history that acknowledges the atrocities perpetrated against Native Americans, African slaves, and non-whites more generally. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has effectively banned African-American studies and prompted the state legislature to pass a Victims of Communism law whereby on Nov 7 each year all public schools must devote at least 45 minutes to expounding on the horrors of the red menace.

Back when a pamphlet initially titled The Manifesto of the Communist Party was first published 175 years ago yesterday, its authors, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, asked: “Where is the party in opposition that has not been decried as communistic by its opponents in power?” They specifically called out “pope and tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French radicals and German police spies”.

Humanity’s possible future was spelt out 175 years ago.

The identity of those haunted by “the spectre of communism” has changed since 1848. The burden of their song, not so much. There are arguments about whether Marx and Engels, strictly speaking, predicted the overthrow of capitalism in the more advanced economy, or merely hoped it would rapidly be fulfilled.

China Miéville’s recent book A Spectre, Haunting delves into controversies that have surrounded the work. He notes how it almost vanished into obscurity for nearly a quarter century, despite being translated from German into several languages, and then re-emerged as a seminal text in the wake of the 1871 Paris Commune. A new lease of life awaited it in the 20th century, with the advent of the 1917 Russian revolutions, even though the ostensibly ‘Marxist’ takeover in that year’s second revolution never quite led to a “dictatorship of the proletariat”. The prospect became academic once Stalin consolidated his rule 10 years later.

It is not unusual for the detractors to blame Marx for the depredations of Soviet society under Stalin and his successors, or to tar Maoist — and even post-Maoist — China with the same brush. It is more or less impossible that Marx, who saw individual and collective freedom as effectively indivisible, would have recognised Stalin or Mao as his ideological progeny. He might even have had his doubts about Lenin.

Most critiques of Marx from the 1930s onwards focus on the inadequacies of the societies he is believed to have inspired. Clearly, there cannot possibly be any evidence that he would have condoned, let alone celebrated, them. ‘Not in my name’ might sum up the likeliest response — Marx and Engels were both wary of self-ordained ‘Marxists’.

It should hardly be surprising that there are aspects in which The Communist Manifesto was wrong; it could be argued that Marx and Engels’ expectation that capitalism would be transcended in short order was over-optimistic. Marx was only 30 in 1848, and Engels two years younger. Both were already authors, but it was the manifesto that earned them international renown. Years later, Engels credited Marx as effectively its only author, but his Condition of the Work­ing Class in England was a seminal source.

They are often criticised for the expectation that the working class would increasingly be impoverished under capitalism. Post-1917 in particular, workers in many countries were offered a more comfortable existence to stay aligned with a more benevolent variety of capitalism. The end of that trend preceded the Soviet Union’s demise. Its repercussions can be observed today in the recourse to food banks in the UK. More broadly, the atrocities of capitalism can easily be discerned in the expanding inequities right across the globe.

Marx and Engels never saw themselves as prophets, let alone arbiters, of the future. Both frequently changed their minds as new facts came to light. But in its basics, their critique of capitalism — from its exploitative tendencies to its constant quest for new markets — as well as their class analysis (“The history of all existing society is the history of class struggles”) continue to resonate. Even anti-Marxists are amazed by their prescience about globalisation.

It remains unlikely that the manifesto, or Marx and Engels’ much-abused and misused other texts, will lose their relevance until neoliberal capitalism is eventually transcended.

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