

Understanding *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx & Engels

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So, you've been assigned to read *The Communist Manifesto*. First things first, *don't panic*. Contrary to popular belief, reading Marx does not make you a communist. However, once you read and understand Marx, you realize that being called a communist isn't actually *that* bad. Here are some notes to help you understand Part I of *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

First, put your mind in the right historical context. Marx wrote the Manifesto in Europe during the 1870s. What was happening in Europe during the 1870s? Google it – some serious stuff was going down!

Marx starts off by saying that “a spectre is haunting Europe.”

Spectre - a phantom/ghost/threat

By using 'spectre' Marx is getting at how the seeds of socialism have started to take root, and the possibility of a socialist revolution is becoming more and more likely; therefore a manifesto is needed to sum up its ideals

Part I: Bourgeois and Proletarians

The history of all existing society is the history of class struggle. There have always been opposing classes, some the oppressors and others the oppressed, struggling against each other since the beginning of history. The development of the bourgeoisie class has not done away with class antagonisms, it is merely repeating the same pattern that can be seen throughout history. What is unique about the bourgeoisie, however, is that class antagonisms are now concentrated into **ONLY** two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

The Bourgeoisie

First of all, what is the bourgeoisie? The bourgeoisie is a socio-economic class that developed alongside and interdependent with capitalism. They are “modern capitalists, owners of the means of production and employers of wage labour.” So what does that mean, exactly? The bourgeoisie owns the means of production, meaning they own the businesses, factories, and resources that drive the economy. Because they own these things, they need people to work them (i.e. process paperwork at the business, sit at the assembly line at the factory, harvest the resources from the earth). The people they hire to do those things are the workers (the proletariat). Essentially, the two classes are interdependent. The bourgeoisie needs workers to keep things running, and the workers need jobs to make a living. The workers sell their labor, and the bourgeoisie buys it for a price (i.e. wages). However because the bourgeoisie have the power, they are the ones who decide what the wages should be, and the workers have no choice but to comply (because at the end of the day, they have to eat, right?).

The bourgeoisie has emerged through various changes that can be observed in history. The earliest traces of the bourgeoisie were the Bergers of Germany, and the class was cultivated through the expansion of new markets in Asia and America. Because these markets were so large and had such high demand, the traditional way of making/selling goods became insufficient to meet the high demand. This is when large-scale manufacturing begins to take place and the bourgeoisie really develops. From the

development of this kind of manufacturing came even larger industrial modes of production, owned by millionaire “Titans of Industry” (think Carnegie and Rockefeller). From here, modern industry has only continued to develop to this day.

There are two points Marx wants us to take from the bourgeoisie class history:

1. That in its development, it has emerged as a single class and pushed to the background all other pre-existing classes (that were once multitudinous and interdependent), lumping them all together into one larger class (the proletariat).
2. “The modern bourgeoisie is itself the product of a long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and exchange.” This is a taste of Marx’s ‘materialist theory of history’. Marx theorizes that the relations of production are the primary and most fundamental way a society is organized. When the relations change (e.g. feudalism vs. modern industry), society changes along with it. the relations of production is the ‘base’ of all society. In other words, the relations of production is a social structure that determines all other social structures in society.

Later in the chapter, Marx sums up:

“We see then: the means of production and of exchange, on whose foundation the bourgeoisie built itself up, were generated in feudal society. At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced...became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces [i.e. the expansion of markets]...they had to be burst asunder... Into their place stepped free competition,” which was accompanied by a corresponding social and political order.

But wait, isn’t industry a good thing? Aren’t ‘expanding markets’ and ‘industrial growth’ and ‘free competition’ all good? And if the bourgeoisie class played a role in making that happen, what’s the problem? *In other words, what’s so bad about the bourgeoisie?*

Marx instructs on several problems with this class, of which I will only highlight a few:

- The bourgeoisie’s only priority is profit. So the only way the bourgeoisie can survive is by constantly changing and revolutionizing the relations of production to increase their output and make new products. But remember that, as noted above, changing relations of production means that it is constantly changing society too. The problem is, relations change too fast, creating an “uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, [and] everlasting uncertainty and agitation.” Marx goes on to warn that relations that were once fixed and reliable “are swept away, [and] all new [relations] become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned...” (One way to think about this is how technology advances so quickly that we are hardly able to keep up. If you buy a laptop it will be ‘outdated’ 1 year later.)
- The profit-driven mentality also makes the bourgeoisie constantly seek new markets, thereby taking them all over the globe and turning every country and society into their consumers. What’s the problem with this?
- The bourgeoisie comes to own resources that actually belong to the people living in that country (i.e. national resources such as water, coffee, minerals, etc; an example of this is how the WTO

sells national resources to large corporations who then charge local people for the products they once got for free or for a very minimal price)

- People in these new markets come to want things that they never wanted before, sometimes things that are totally ridiculous (Example: look up “Avon in the Amazon” on YouTube)
- The bourgeoisie has concentrated power and resources into relatively few hands; as a result, governments become more centralized and local people/governments lose their sovereignty.

But, there is an even bigger problem with the bourgeois society: it cannot naturally sustain itself. It gets too big, it expands too quickly, it produces so much that it creates INEVITABLE economic crises that get bigger and more dangerous as time goes on. Marx compares capitalism to a “sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.”

The unsustainability of bourgeois society is an important point for Marx: the nature of the bourgeoisie creates the conditions for its own undoing: “The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism...are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself.” And who will be the ones the end the bourgeoisie? The proletariat, the workers.

The Proletariat

As mentioned above, the proletariat are the class of workers who work for the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie needs the labor of the proletariat to keep things running, so they buy the workers’ labor for a price (wages). This relationship is not as fair as it sounds. The bourgeoisie holds all the power, so they not only decide what the price of labor should be, but also whether or not the labor is even valuable; as less ‘skill’ is required, the value of the labor decreases, and so does the wage. However, because the bourgeoisie are always seeking ways to expand profit, they will always try to decrease their cost and increase their output by using more machines (which don’t need to be paid wages) and/or more division of labor; as this happens, the skill of the work goes down, then the wages for the workers go down, and the bourgeoisie are smiling all the way to the bank.

In this arrangement, workers are treated as commodities, which is ultimately dehumanizing to workers who are essentially selling themselves for survival. Even after they get their paychecks, they have no choice but to interact with the rest of bourgeois society which demands the fruit of their labor: rent for the landlord, payments to the grocer and electricity company, and so on. And thus the worker must keep returning the bourgeoisie to sell her labor, what other choice does she have?

Even small business owners and shopkeepers are part of the working class, because they do not generate enough capital to compete on the scale the really drives the industrial economy. They can’t compete with large capitalists.

The proletariat workers have always been in friction with the bourgeoisie owners, but have only focused their frustrations locally (on a particular factory or individual bourgeois person) rather than on the whole system of bourgeois production. In other words, they haven’t yet had a revolution, but there is plenty of discontent. This will change as time goes on, for a number of reasons:

- As industry develops, capital becomes concentrated among relatively few people, and the working class grows considerably.

- The automation of the workplace will obliterate wages
- The inevitable economic crises of capitalism (recall “the sorcerer” quote above) will make wages unacceptably low and fluctuating

The workers are coming together (in the form of unions), but their coalescence, theoretically, will only continue to grow. However, one thing that prevents this from happening is the fact that workers have to compete against each other for jobs and wages. This keeps them from developing a ‘class consciousness’ and recognizing that together they have power. But, for a number of reasons, Marx believes that the proletariat can develop its enlightenment to lead to a workers’ revolution. The proletariat, embodied by the majority of the people, have the power to be revolutionary.

Part II: Proletarians and Communists

First, Proletarian does NOT mean Communist. They are SEPARATE groups. Proletariat is the whole class of workers in a particular country. Communists are a group who recognize the injustice of bourgeois society and seek to facilitate proletariat workers’ movements across the globe.

Communists have three main goals: to facilitate the recognition among workers that the proletariat is class, to overthrow bourgeoisie supremacy, and bring the workers to political power.

Like every other revolution in Marx’s theory of human history, the Communist revolution seeks to transform property. Unlike other revolutions, it seeks to eliminate property, rather than merely transform it, because property is the ultimate form of exploitation.

Communists seek the abolition of private property. Many people have a problem with this, so Marx tries to field potential critiques. First, he refutes the idea that having personal property is the same as having freedom and independence. Second, he thinks that personal property that is the result of artistry or personal creation should not be abolished, because there is a difference between personal property and private property. Also, capitalism is corrupting personal property anyway (for example, painters have to purchase their materials to make art from large capitalist craft stores, whereas they used to have to make the materials themselves or trade with other craftspeople).

What communists seek to abolish is modern bourgeois private property because it is the basis of exploitation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Marx explains this from two different angles. First, for capitalism to ‘work’ it requires the collective effort of almost everyone in society. Yet when this collective effort generates property, the property is not shared collectively. It only belongs to a few people, even though many people contributed to making it happen. Second, capitalists exploit workers in the interest of profits by insisting on paying a ‘minimum’ wage. This wage is only enough for a worker to exist, it is not enough for him to thrive or move up. If the profit and private property incentives are eliminated, so too will exploitation.

Whereas labor in the capitalist society is used for the sole purpose of creating more capital for the ruling class, labor in the communist society is used to enrich and promote the existence of the laborer herself.

From here, Marx refutes some of the common critiques of communism. I'll only highlight a few of them to make a point about Marx's materialist theory of history and culture. In the following section, Marx is trying to make clear that the economic social structure determines not only other social structures in society, but also cultural structures like values, religion, etc.

- What about individuality and freedom?
 - Marx argues that, contrary to critique, communism does not destroy individuality and freedom; rather, it destroys the versions of individuality and freedom that we have come to know (and therefore accept as true) under capitalism. Recall that this is part of his materialist vision - because society has been set up under capitalist relations, everything else in society, including culture, has been organized accordingly. According to Marx, communism does not prevent the freedom or individuality of any person, so long as that person does not use their power to subjugate or exploit others for their own individual interest.
- Won't communism make us lose our culture?
 - To this, Marx responds with a similar idea to the individuality/freedom critique. He asks, 'whose culture' will be lost? While the bourgeois culture will vanish, another culture will take its place.
- These are two important points for establishing the materialist theory. I have pieced together the following quote from one paragraph: "your very ideas [about freedom, culture, religion, etc] are but the outgrowth of the conditions of bourgeois production and bourgeois property...the selfish misconception that induces you to transform [the norms from the current mode of production] into eternal laws [has been shared by] every ruling class that has preceded you [throughout history]."

Later in the chapter, Marx writes: "Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life? What else does the history of ideas prove [if not] that intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed. The ruling ideas of each age have [always] been the ideas of its ruling class."

Marx argues that the reason some ideas seem eternal is because history has always been the product of class antagonisms. In the past, when society was restructured, a new ruling class simply replaced another one; and while the ideals changed along with it, remnants of the ideals did remain. But, under communism, there will be no ruling class. Therefore, there will not be ideas that are made to seem 'eternal' or based on 'human nature.' He writes: "The history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms in different epochs. But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all ages: the exploitation of one part of society by the other. No wonder, then, that the social consciousness of past ages, despite all the multiplicity and variety it displays, [maintains] certain common forms or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms."