

Study Guide for *The Communist Manifesto*



[Using this Guide](#)

[List of other study guides](#)

[Click here for the Manifesto online.](#)

The Communist Manifesto, first published in 1848 for the Communist League, had little influence in its own day. Only after Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' other writings had made their views on socialism widely known did it become a standard text. For about a century it was one of the most widely read (and some would argue misread) documents in the world.

But why study it today? Most of the communist world has collapsed. Nominally communist countries like Vietnam and China are busily building market economies in defiance of everything Marx advocated, and Korea and Cuba are barely surviving, serving as models for no one. Has not Marxism been relegated to the ash-heap of history?

There are several reasons why *The Communist Manifesto* is still an important document. As a historically significant work, it has a certain intrinsic interest. It is good to know what the great ideas are which have shaped history. Some people would argue that Marxists so thoroughly betrayed Marxism that the document can be used to show why attempts at building communist states failed: they were never truly Marxist at all. If true Marxism has never been tried, then it might be worth reconsidering afresh. Or if, as others argue, Marxism has intrinsic flaws that doomed it from the beginning, we might hope to discover traces of them here which might teach us why Marxism should be shunned. The goal here is not to convert you, but to help you explore Marx's writing from his point of view, so that you can understand his actual meaning while still maintaining a stance that can allow you to think critically about the subject and form your own opinions.

It is important to understand that Marx played two important roles in world history: as a critic of capitalism and as an advocate of socialism. He actually wrote very little on the latter subject. Although a strong believer in the importance of building socialism, he spent most of his time and energy on a subtle and complex critique of the capitalist system. This critique is still very influential on many historians, art and literature scholars, sociologists and others. There have been many neo-Marxisms which have been based more or less loosely on the original ideas of Marx and which are widely discussed today. Whether you want to explore such ideas or combat them, it's good to have some notion of the subject.

A manifesto is a document which proclaims publicly--or makes manifest-- the central ideas of a group or individual. Although the organization for which this one was written was underground (for the simple reason that it was illegal) Marx always envisioned the socialist movement as open. He rejected secret conspiracies because his ideal of building socialism was envisioned as a majority enterprise which could only accumulate the necessary momentum through an open, broadly-based campaign of education and exhortation.

Engels was Marx's close collaborator and a significant thinker in his own right. He outlived Marx by many years, and produced several volumes which are still influential. Marx was clearly the more powerful thinker of the two, but Engels was the better stylist. Although Engels may have been responsible for much of the eloquent writing in the Manifesto, because it incorporates Marx's ideas and embodies some central concepts of what came to be known as Marxism the following questions will refer to the authors simply as "Marx."

The terms "socialist" and "communist" have been defined in a bewildering variety of ways. When reading them it is always important to know what the writer means by them. For Marx socialism was the more comprehensive term; communism was an advanced stage of socialism. Socialism would prepare the way by nationalizing the "means of production" (factories, farms, mines, transportation, etc.) and putting them under the control of those he viewed as the sole producers of wealth: the workers. He viewed political equality and freedom as incomplete (or even illusory) without economic equality. Therefore this redistribution of economic power was aimed at extending democracy far beyond the limits envisioned by earlier democratic revolutions. Social services like health, education, and housing would be provided free, but people would still be paid wages according to their work.

When all nations had developed socialist economies, they would begin to evolve into an international communist society. The vision of communism was very similar to that of anarchism: a stateless society in which central government had "withered away," local, ground-up control of all affairs by strictly democratic processes based at the place of work, abolition of the market system (no money, no buying and selling) and its replacement by a system according to which people would voluntarily work for the common good to the extent they were able under the understanding that they could receive whatever they needed for free ("from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs"). National boundaries and governments having been eliminated, war would cease.

Marx rejected the belief that such a society could be set up immediately as utopian. People would need a long period of reeducation under socialism to condition them away from the selfish orientation produced by capitalism and toward the wider perspective necessary to create communism. Many of his socialist and anarchist adversaries argued that it was impossible to achieve communism by passing through a stage which retained and even strengthened the centralized state government. Marx replied that it was impossible to leap directly into communism from socialism. What's your opinion on this question?

The most common reply is that both are impossible because "you can't change human nature." What Marx set out to prove was that not only had "human nature" changed many times in the past: there is no such thing as a static human nature. We are products of our environment, particularly of the economic system in which we live. People living under feudalism are motivated by feudal motives and think them natural and fixed, just as people living under capitalism are motivated by capitalist motives and think those natural and fixed. Occasionally in history people undergo what is now called a "paradigm shift" in values, based on an economic transformation. It is this process that he attempts to sketch in the first section of the *Manifesto*. If people's values have changed radically in the past, he implies, they are certain to change again radically in the future. In a socialist society it would be nonsense to say that people will always naturally tend to become owners of factories because such owners would be as impossible, and such desires would be as irrational as the desire to own the Moon. Engels spent a good deal of energy studying so-called "primitive communist" societies to show that sharing could be as natural and widespread an attitude toward wealth as acquisition. What do you know about pre-capitalist cultures that might support or undermine this argument?

Although he does not address the question in the *Manifesto*, it is important to understand why Marx believed an armed revolution would be necessary to establish socialism. He was convinced that the democratic revolutions which swept Europe in 1848 had merely substituted one tyrant for another. The bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) had replaced the old aristocracy as the rulers in law as well as in fact. Their slogans of freedom and equality for all, he felt, concealed a determination to remain supreme over the proletariat (industrial laborers) which made up the vast majority of society. He did not reject bourgeois democracy because it was democratic, only because he felt it was limited to the bourgeoisie. Economic power, not the vote, was the ultimate guarantee

of political power. He was in favor of using elections as an organizing tool, but he was certain that in most countries the ruling class (the bourgeoisie) would forcibly prevent any democratically-elected socialist government from taking power.

He once commented that in only two industrialized nations were democratic institutions so firmly entrenched that a transition to socialism might be peacefully achieved: the Netherlands and the United States. Why do you think this transition did not happen? He also felt that communism could be built only in highly industrialized countries. Why do you think communist revolutions happened first in nations with very little industry, like Russia and China? What effects did this fact have on the course socialism took in these countries?

The manifesto is meant to achieve two major goals: to convert the proletarians and their allies to Marx's version of socialism (there were many other versions, much more influential than his) and to put the ruling class on notice as to the revolutionaries' intentions. So it expresses both hopes and threats. Its central themes are well summed up in the long central paragraph on p. 6 of Engels' introduction. Read it carefully. Note how he goes on to compare his theory of class struggle with Darwin's theory of evolution, just as Étienne did in *Germinal*.

Prologue

The opening words of the *Manifesto* are famous. Marx taunts his adversaries, saying they are terrified of communism without understanding in the slightest what it is. Since communism is such a threat, it must be important, and worth understanding. Hence the *Manifesto*.

I: Bourgeois and Proletarians

Marx felt that the revolutions of 1848 marked a major turning point, as is now undisputed. He sets out to trace the patterns which have run through all of preceding history. Unsurprisingly, he considers exclusively European societies, beginning with the classical world. What does he say is the main source of conflict throughout history? How does he say the bourgeoisie has differed in the way it has affected this pattern of conflict? He explains how the bourgeoisie (literally dwellers in towns) originated out of the old medieval peasant class, in opposition to the medieval titled aristocracy (kings, dukes, knights, etc.).

These people derived their wealth from trade rather than agriculture. Why was the age of exploration and colonization important to them? What caused the old guild system to collapse? What have the major effects of the ensuing industrial revolution been? What are the major achievements caused by the extension (expansion) of industry? As the bourgeoisie grew in power, what happened to the other old feudal classes like the aristocracy and the peasants? Did the bourgeoisie create capitalism or did capitalism create the bourgeoisie, according to Marx?

What does this famous phrase mean: "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie?" Do you agree? Why? Note that he praises the bourgeoisie for having abolished the feudal system and prepared the way for socialism; but he does so ironically. What does he imply have been the main harmful effects of destroying feudalism? How has capitalism's emergence changed "human nature?" "Exchange value" is a typical Marxist term which does not exactly mean "price," but in this context that is close enough. What does he say is the limit of bourgeois freedom? Do you think he is right in saying that occupations are only respected according to how much they are paid? Can you think of examples to illustrate his point about the reduction of "the family relation to a mere money relation" from *Germinal*? Keep in mind that he is speaking here mainly of the effects of capitalism on workers, not on the bourgeoisie. He uses the term "reactionaries" from time to time. What does it mean? (Look it up in a dictionary.) It is commonly misused to mean merely "those who react to something."

To what cause does he attribute the bourgeoisie's energy in creating railways, factories, etc.? Why do owners need constantly to create new ways of manufacturing and processing goods? How does competition drive this process? Can you think of modern examples, or counter-examples? How does the

very essence of bourgeois production (capitalism, used interchangeably with "bourgeois society" below) make it by definition a revolutionary force? Why does capitalism have to spread worldwide? What tendencies undermine the independence of nation-states? Can you think of examples today of this sort of international economic interdependence? What forces generate expanded markets for capitalism? Can you think of examples of "new wants being created?"

What effects does he say international trade has on "intellectual production" such as literature, philosophy, music, etc.? Is literature more or less international now than in the Middle Ages? Has nationalism been weakened as a force in the last hundred years, as Marx expected? Why or why not? He argues that all societies tend to become civilized (drawn into the social patterns of European civilization). To what extent is this true? What is the process by which he says the bourgeois society creates a world after its own image? How has capitalism altered the relationship between cities and the countryside? Has that process continued since Marx's time? What does he mean by the "idiocy of rural life?" Farmers a hundred years ago were considered much less sophisticated than city dwellers. Is that still true? What analogy is he drawing between the city/country relationship and the "civilized"/"barbarian" relationship? According to Marx, how evenly is wealth distributed under capitalism? How has capitalism tended to create large countries with uniform laws?

What have been the main creations of capitalism during the preceding 100 years? Having described how the emergence of capitalism from mercantilism destroyed the old feudal system, Marx proclaims that a similar transformation is now taking place. How has capitalism created forces which work against its continued existence? A "commercial crisis" would more likely be called a depression or recession today. What pattern does he feel there is in these crises?

Why does capitalism tend to over-produce goods, unlike any previous form of economy? How does an over-abundance of goods produce an apparent "famine" (depression)? Is it possible to produce too much? How do economists today relate manufacturers' inventories to the health of the economy? How could such over-production be prevented? Marx shows his Enlightenment heritage by objecting to such a result as absurd, irrational. What are some of the irrational contradictions that he sees in capitalism? What three methods does the bourgeoisie use to solve such a crisis? Why do these methods not really solve the ultimate problem? How have the bourgeoisie created the force which will destroy them? Why are laborers forced to sell their services for the lowest possible wages? What "law" did we study in *Germinal* which states this proposition? In fact, in the century after the writing of the *Manifesto* the wages of workers tended generally to rise (though with many fluctuations and crises), until most workers under capitalism were much too prosperous to be enemies of the system which produced their wages. What forces do you think caused this result, contradicting Marx's expectation?

Besides low wages, what other evils does Marx trace to modern industrialism? How could these evils be avoided? What is the relationship between the "repulsiveness" of labor and pay? To what extent is hard work not rewarded with more wealth? How is work made harder? Why has industrialism resulted in the entry into the workplace of more and more women and children? What effects does Marx think this has had on society? Can you illustrate this point from *Germinal*?

What happens to the "lower strata of the middle class" (what Marx elsewhere calls the "petit" [small] or "petty" bourgeoisie)? Can you think of an example from *Germinal*? What are the major stages in the class struggle as the proletariat develops? Can you illustrate these stages from *Germinal*? [Those who advocate destroying machinery to end its oppressive effects are called "Luddites" after a group of weavers who destroyed power looms in England inspired by a mythical figure named Ned Ludd in 1811-1816.] How does *Germinal* illustrate the process by which workers begin to organize their opposition to the owners? As the conflict develops, most of its victims are not the large capitalists, but their small competitors (like Deneulin); thus Marx says "every victory so obtained is a victory for the bourgeoisie." The struggle is becoming sharpened. What forces continually strengthen the proletariat?

What unstable forces inherent in capitalism cause the workers to seek organizations which will help them stabilize their wages? Since most strikes and riots are failures, what is the "real fruit" of these struggles? Why can modern workers organize so much more easily than their medieval predecessors? What is the next step after the proletarians have become conscious of themselves as a

class rather than as isolated individuals, and become organized? As Engels' footnote points out, one of the early successes of labor organizations was the passing of a law restricting the normal work day to ten hours (as is the case in *Germinal*), though overtime remained common. In earlier industrialism it was common to keep a factory or mine going around the clock with two shifts of twelve hours each.

How does the need of the bourgeoisie to seek allies among the proletariat help to strengthen the latter? Which of these two classes--bourgeoisie and proletariat--tends to grow the most? According to Marx' s definitions, which class does your family belong to: bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production who live off of profits) or proletariat (people who work for a salary), or would you define their status in some other way? When Marx says that "a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class" he is thinking primarily of intellectuals like himself and Engels, who allied themselves with the workers despite their bourgeois background. The relationship of such idealistic Marxists to working class movements has been a troubled one. Can you think of any examples? What problems might these two groups have in relating to one another? Why does he call peasants reactionaries? Was Marx right? Can you think of an important modern Communist revolution which was created primarily among and for peasants?

Professional criminals, prostitutes, beggars, etc. make up what Marx calls the *Lumpenproletariat*. They too are not likely to be revolutionary, according to him. When Marx says that the proletarian is without property he doesn't mean workers don't own their clothes and toothbrushes. To what extent are the workers in *Germinal* "without property?" It is this narrow definition of "property" that Marx uses throughout his writings. He had no objection to people owning personal belongings. To what extent has modern capitalism stripped workers of their national character? Are proletarians less nationalistic than the bourgeoisie? Why does he believe that proletarians will be motivated to destroy the whole system of individual private property? What fact makes the proletarian movement different from all previous movements? Does Marx believe that the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie can be carried out internationally, all at once? What might be the weaknesses of carrying it out country by country?

Why does Marx say the bourgeoisie is unfit to rule? The final paragraph of this chapter summarizes the argument of the whole. Read it carefully. He believes that capitalism inevitably creates its own destruction. What do you think of this thesis?

II: Proletarians and Communists

What does Marx say the relationship of the Communists to the proletarians as a whole is? In what ways are they different from other working-class parties? What are their immediate aims?

Marx argues that his theories are not mere intellectual inventions but scientifically provable facts. What effect might it have on political debate if one believes that one's arguments are irrefutable fact? Marx now sets himself to answer many of the most common accusations against the Communists. What does he say is the usual argument in favor of the right of personally acquiring property (land, factories, mines, etc.)? What do you think of these arguments? What are his answers? Do you find them convincing?

What does he mean when he says that capital (the money and goods which make capitalism possible) is a social creation? Again he discusses the "iron law of wages." He says that under capitalism living labor (the work of the workers) is but a means to increase accumulated labor (the wealth of the owners). What does he say is the aim of labor under communism? Does Marx want to abolish all individuality and freedom? Read the last paragraph carefully. What is he saying?

Some Communists have denounced all individuality and most individual liberty. Do you think Marx would have agreed with them? What does he mean by saying that the bourgeoisie has done away with private property for nine-tenths of the population? The fact that most Americans own no part of the means of production doesn't seem to make them opposed to private property as such. Why not? Can you identify factors that Marx overlooked? When he says that the middle-class owner must be made

impossible, he simply means that society must be reorganized so that no one is allowed to own large masses of productive property. Do you think he would have agreed with attempts to kill capitalists? What is his answer to the argument that the ambition to acquire property (become a business owner) is necessary to prevent "universal laziness?" (His answer continues on the next page.)

Marx says that the bourgeoisie fears that a proletarian revolution will destroy all culture because *bourgeois* culture will no longer be produced. What does he imply about the continued existence of culture? Why does he argue it is pointless to use arguments based on freedom, culture, and law against communism? The earliest Western theoretician of communism, Plato, had argued for a lottery rotating the matings of men and women to create a sense of solidarity in which all citizens would view themselves as part of one big family. Some other communists had argued for similar arrangements, like group marriage or "free love," but Marx did not. He did feel that people should be free to form their own unions without any role being played by the state. He was also opposed to the idea of "illegitimacy." Here he sarcastically attacks his critics without making his own position explicit. Remembering *Germinal*, why do you think he says the family is "practically absent" among the proletarians?

He foretells the vanishing of the bourgeois family (though not necessarily the family in general). What evils does he say the bourgeois family causes? He answers those who argue that education will be destroyed and replaced by propaganda by saying that supposedly neutral bourgeois education is in fact filled with more or less hidden propaganda for capitalist values: there is no neutrality possible. The workers have to change the values taught to ones that support rather than undermine them. What do you think of this argument? Is it possible to have a truly unbiased form of education? Is it desirable? Do we have one now? What evidence does he offer that the bourgeoisie does not really value the family for its own sake? He then returns to the most sensational charge: the community (sharing) of women. Marx rejects this. According to Marx, why do the bourgeoisie suppose that this is an essential part of communism? How does he argue that it is the bourgeoisie which has really promoted the "community of women?"

How does he say the abolition of the present system of production would change this situation? He agrees that the Communists do want to abolish countries and nationality. What are his arguments in saying that working people are not attached to their countries? Clearly this is not generally true. Even Stalin had to resort to patriotism to muster the support of Russians behind him during World War II. Why has nationalism proven so persistent and powerful? Does this fact undermine Marxism? What does the passage which begins in the last paragraphs on this page and continues on the next mean? (Hint: the point is discussed above, in the introduction to these questions.) This argument is one of the most widespread and powerful still being debated in academic and intellectual circles today, and it is important to understand it.

As Engels points out, the ten-point program outlined here is very conservative and preliminary, and would have been much more developed had the *Manifesto* been written later. Which of the points seem radical, which conservative? Which have been in fact commonly adopted in countries like the U.S.? Which do you agree with? Disagree with? Explain this ideal: "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." Does this sound like communism as you understand it? As it developed in the Soviet Union?

III: Socialist and Communist Literature

In this chapter, which you are not required to read, Marx presents a now very dated summary of other socialist theories and tries to show how his is uniquely effective, scientific and rational.

IV: Position of the Communists in Relation to the Various Existing Opposition Parties

Much of this section can be summarized by simply saying that the Communists allied themselves with whatever groups they thought were moving in the right direction ("progressive").

As Marx predicted, Germany developed one of the largest and most powerful socialist movements in the

world; but the international socialist movement almost collapsed when Germany launched World War I and the socialist party supported the government. However, socialism remained popular enough so that Adolph Hitler thought he had to call his movement "National Socialism" to gain widespread acceptance, even though once in power he vigorously exterminated socialists. What does Marx say are the special aims worked for by the communists within the various reform movements? Most people misquote the ending of the *Manifesto* with the slightly more catchy "Workingmen of all countries, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!" What weaknesses can you find in this call to revolution?

Do you think communism as Marx describes it is a desirable ideal, a foolish dream, a undesirable ideal, or something else? Why? Some people argue that true Marxism has never been attempted, and that if his original ideas were followed it might be more successful. Marxism, they say, has been discredited by people who betrayed Marx. What do you think of this argument?

Notes by [Paul Brians](#), Department of English, Washington State University, Pullman 99164-5020.

Revised May 1, 2006

Version of June 14, 1995.

[Paul Brians' Home Page](#) This page has been accessed **371763** times since June 6, 1997.