

Classic Text 12 - Communism



Seeing red? The following discussion is a non-partisan analysis of the philosophical foundations of modern Communism as set forth in [The Communist Manifesto](#)¹.

Why study Communism?

It is no exaggeration to say that Communism has massively shaped world history and for that reason alone philosophers should take a special interest in the ideas that once motivated and continue to motivate it. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 however, one communist state after another has collapsed, sparing only China and Vietnam, which have gone one to develop market economies, as well as North Korea, which functions as a dictatorship and Cuba, which exhibits model health care and educational systems under Communism, albeit controlled by a family dictatorship.

Some blame the collapse of communist states on the betrayal of Marxist principles, while others argue that Marxism has never truly been implemented and that we should take up the struggle anew. However one endearing role that Marx plays in the continuing history of world ideas is in the critique of Capitalism and advocacy of Socialism, a form of government now embraced by many of the most progressive first world states and aspired to by many in the developing world, including South Africa.

The main obstacle to studying Communism for the first time is in separating Communism as a Political Philosophy from the atrocities that have been perpetrated in the name of Communism. The same could not be said for Christianity. Despite a litany of persecutions, inquisitions, witch hunts and

ongoing discrimination in the name of Christianity, there have never been so many people who identify themselves as Christians as there are now. (Some 2 billion)

The idea of **Communism** (from the Latin *communis* - common, universal) as a classless society has its roots in antiquity. Plato, in his *Laws* described such a state as follows:

The first and highest form of the state and of the government and of the law is that in which there prevails most widely the ancient saying that “Friends have all things in common.” Whether there is now, or ever will be, this communion of women and children and of property, in which the private and individual is altogether banished from life, and things which are by nature private, such as eyes and ears and hands, have become common, and all men express praise and blame, and feel joy and sorrow, on the same occasions, and the laws unite the city to the utmost, – whether all this is possible or not, I say that no man, acting upon any other principle, will ever constitute a state more exalted in virtue, or truer or better than this. (*Laws*, Book V.)

The Roman Servile Wars, specifically the Third Servile War (73 - 71 BC) also known as the “War of Spartacus” by Plutarch, is often hailed by historians as the embodiment of the ideal of a society based on common ownership of property, although this interpretation has not been confirmed. Biblically, on the other hand, if the Christian Scriptures are to be believed, we have an unambiguous statement of Communism in the *Acts of the Apostles* Ch. 2 vv. 42, 44 and 45:

42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and in fellowship ... 44 And all that believed were together, and had all things in common; 45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. (King James Version)

Without multiplying examples unnecessarily, it is evident that even these few cases entail the following:

1. Common ownership of property; the absence of classes, money and the state. (Engels, 1847 §18)
2. A social, political and economic ideology and a movement that aims to establish such a social order. (Engels, 1878 Ch. 3 ¶13)

What sets the ancient or biblical forms of Communism apart from their modern varieties (and remember that in Philosophy, “modern” is anything from Kant, circa 1800 onwards) is the massive social upheavals since the middle ages, particularly the industrial revolution. Although in the teaching of Communism, it is customary to first explain the **dialectical materialism** of Marx which developed out of the dialectic of Hegel, motivated by Kant and so on, it is perhaps more economical to follow Marx (and Engels) in their *Communist Manifesto* before considering its philosophical origins.

Contextual Introduction to *The Communist Manifesto*

According to Paul Briens, “a manifesto [in general,] is a document which proclaims publicly - or makes manifest - the central ideas of a group or individual.” *The Communist Manifesto*, in particular (originally *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, in German) was written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on the instruction of the then underground Communist League as the programme of its

Second Congress in London, 1847. Despite the organisation being illegal, “Max always envisioned the socialist movement as open.” (Brians, 2011)

Both Marx and Engels worked jointly on the Manifesto, beginning immediately after the congress, while they were still in London, resuming their work on their return to Brussels in December of the same year. From the time that Engels departed for Paris at the end of 1847 until his return at the end of January the following year Marx worked on the manuscript alone. At the end of February 1848, the Manifesto was finally published as a 23-page pamphlet in a dark green cover. Subsequent editions came out in German, Danish, Polish, Swedish, Russian, English, and Italian. Following Marx’s death, the Manifesto ran into several editions, all of which Engels read, and wrote prefaces for some of them.

Although authorship is correctly attributed to both men, Engels wrote in the preface to the 1883 German edition of the Manifesto, that it was “essentially Marx’s work” and that “the basic thought... belongs solely and exclusively to Marx.” (Wikipedia: The Communist Manifesto) After his death in 1883, Engels wrote of his association with Marx:

I cannot deny that both before and during my forty years’ collaboration with Marx I had a certain independent share in laying the foundations of the theory, but the greater part of its leading basic principles belongs to Marx....Marx was a genius; we others were at best talented. Without him the theory would not be by far what it is today. It therefore rightly bears his name. (Hunt, 2009 p. 117)

The preamble to the Manifesto itself declares its own *raison d’être* and although outlined in terms of 19th century power relations however, Marx and Engels could equally well have been describing the international drive for global supremacy in the 21st century. Indeed, the Marxist scholar Chris Harman has written of the Manifesto that...

There is still a compulsive quality to its prose as it provides insight after insight into the society in which we live, where it comes from and where it’s going to. It is still able to explain, as mainstream economists and sociologists cannot, today’s world of recurrent wars and repeated economic crisis, of hunger for hundreds of millions on the one hand and “overproduction” on the other. There are passages that could have come from the most recent writings on globalisation. (Hartman, 2010 p. 3)

Before deciding whether that is an accurate assessment you should actually read the Manifesto for yourself. It is available free, for download [here](#) . However, there are some caveats: Although Marx was writing for the benefit of the intelligent layman or worker, he takes a good deal of historical and sociological knowledge of his day for granted. Some of these are referenced as footnotes; however you may benefit by consulting trusted online resources like *Wikipedia*, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* or the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Secondly, it is necessary to pay particular attention to the definition of words like “Bourgeois, Petty-Bourgeois, Proletarians, Socialists, Communists *etc.*” which are defined in the text, again some only as footnotes, because of the difference of some, in sense, from the vernacular of today. If you are pressed for time, you may want to skim or skip section III altogether as this is not essential to the main argument.

Having read the Communist Manifesto we can turn to a discussion of its contents:

The Introduction

“A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism” are very much the words of cold war rhetoric, and yet they are undoubtedly an accurate statement of the 19th century Europe potentates regarded for Communism: Evil and terrifying. Instead, Marx and Engels intended the Manifesto to be an open document that would set forth their views and through understanding would dispel the bogeyman “spectre.”

I. Bourgeois and Proletarians

The Marxist conception of history in the first chapter of the Communist Manifesto begins with the seemingly axiomatic: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” The distinction between the contending bourgeoisie and proletariat classes is a modern one that turns on the ownership of the means of production. In ancient and medieval times any man could, theoretically, participate in the economy by selling the fruits of his manual labour. (We retain the sex specific language of the day for effect.) A tradesman for example, who owned the few tools necessary for his trade, could sell the product of his skilled labour. By the close of the Industrial Revolution however, the process of mass production manufacture had taken the means of production out the hands of labourers and transferred it to the bourgeoisie who own the machines and the factories that house them.

Marx and Engels sketch a brief history of class struggles leading up to the modern struggle between bourgeois and proletariat in which there remain no other bonds between men other than self-interest and the “callous” system of “cash payment.” Indeed, labourers find work only in so far as their labour increases capital, such that they become a commodity at the mercy of the forces of the market economy; the cost of his production being restricted to that of his subsistence and propagation.

Although the Manifesto does not discuss wage slavery at this point, Marx only a year before declared, “The slave, together with his labour-power, was sold to his owner once for all.... The [wage] labourer, on the other hand, sells his very self, and that by fractions.... He [belongs] to the capitalist class; and it is for him ... to find a buyer in this capitalist class.” (Marx, 1847 Ch. 2)

Because his only means of income is from the selling of his labour, he has no choice but to accept wages beneath the actual value his employment; the difference between which accrues as wealth in private hands, hence the formation and increase of capital. Worse still, because of increased mechanical efficiency and overproduction, he is forced to content with members of his own class, even becoming enemies.

But the proletariat are not entirely powerless, forming permanent associations such as Trade Unions in order to protect their wages. Marx and Engels simply note that: “Here and there, the contest breaks out into riots.” However, it is not clear whether they are referring to tangible skirmishes or impromptu conflicts with employers through the withholding of labour - something we today would characterise as a strike. Although workers may chalk up a local victory here and there, their challenge lies in the coalition of workers into a political entity that “compels legislative recognition of [their] particular interests.”

However it is not through legislative means that society can be transformed, not while the system of wage labour is in place. Although the Manifesto does not make out a positive case for why such change should be through armed revolution, Brians points out that Marx “was convinced that the democratic revolutions which swept Europe in 1848 had merely substituted one tyrant for another.” (Brians, 2011) This is consistent with the following general passage towards the end of the first chapter of the Manifesto:

All the preceding classes that got the upper hand sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation. The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation. They have nothing of their own to secure and to fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property.

The first chapter ends with something of a rhetorical crescendo: “...the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.” However as Phil Gasper points out, Marx and Engels are not arguing for “some kind of metaphysical theory of history in which the triumph of socialism is preordained.” (Gasper, 1998) Instead, the paragraph begins with an hypothetical syllogism followed by a choice between one of two inevitabilities, as stated in the opening lines of the section: historically class struggles ended “...either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”

II. Proletarians and Communists

As the title suggests, this section begins by setting out the relationship between Communists and the rest of the proletariat. These do not bear repetition because they are stated clearly and succinctly; however a number of statements are worth highlighting because they address, not all equally effectively, some of the most common accusations against Communism. Indeed much of the section reads as gruff repost to an off-page detractor.

To wit, the claim that “The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered... They merely express, in general terms, actual relations... going on under our very eyes,” suggests that Marx and Engels regard their theories as self-evident truths or at least scientific facts. However helpful their insights, claiming that their observations or theories are irrefutable stymies debate, if only because there is no point in arguing with someone who already *knows* that they are right. In the interests of charitable interpretation however, we will therefore assume that the authors were merely highly confident of the position.

The elucidation as to just what property communists intend to abolish is helpful here, chiefly because this is one of the straw man arguments that are employed by the capitalist propaganda machine against Communism. By private property, Marx and Engels are referring not to the fruits of man’s own labour but to that of wage-labour which creates capital *i.e.* the money and goods which make capitalism possible. Because capital in turn, is not just a personal but also a social capacity it requires the participation of all, or very nearly all, of society to realise it. Think of other faith based entities like currency. If insufficient people believe in its value, a currency literally has no power of exchange.

In the previous chapter, Marx and Engels touched on the relation between wage-labour and capital; here they make it explicit: Wherever labour is cheap or workers are unprotected, the price of wage-labour is that of the minimum wage - just enough to stay alive and well enough to work, as well as to reproduce in order to ensure the continuity of fresh labour. But the value of labour to the capitalist is far greater than that of the minimum wage. The difference between the actual market value of the goods and services provided by labour and the minimum wage is accumulated as capital, with which to raise more capital. Communists accordingly, do not intend "to abolish this personal appropriation of the products of labour... All that we want to do away with is the miserable character of this appropriation, under which the labourer lives merely to increase capital, and is allowed to live only in so far as the interest of the ruling class requires it." So it is not that by abolishing private property that Communism intends to deprive people of reaping the products of society, only that in so doing they should be prevented from subjugating others by such means.

As if this hasn't been adequately clarified, the authors deal with another bogymen: If private property were to be abolished, nobody would bother to work and universal idleness would overtake humanity. Turning this reasoning around: "bourgeois society ought long ago to have gone to the dogs through sheer idleness; for those of its members who work, acquire nothing, and those who acquire anything do not work." The objection they argue is an expression of the tautology that there can be no wage-labour when there is no capital; the mistake being the assumption that wage-labour is the only kind of labour. From the point of view of the capitalist at least, it is the only kind of *desirable* labour. For everybody else it is undesirable.

The same objection has been made with respect to culture: "Just as, to the bourgeois, the disappearance of class property is the disappearance of production itself, so the disappearance of class culture is to him identical with the disappearance of all culture." Again the mistake being made is the assumption that bourgeois culture is the *only* culture.

What follows has been seized upon and demonised in the form of propaganda: "Abolition of the family!" Marks an Engels were not against family in general, they were simply predicting the vanishing of the bourgeois family, along with that of capital based on private gain. As it is, they maintain there is a *de facto* "absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution."

Nor do communists intend to "introduce community of women." In fact Plato was far more radical in this respect. In *The Republic* (Bk V) he puts these words into Socrates' mouth: "... the wives of our guardians are to be common, and their children are to be common, and no parent is to know his own child, nor any child his parent."

On the contrary the Manifesto reads: "The Communists have no need to introduce community of women; it has existed almost from time immemorial." What follows is an *ad hominem* accusing the bourgeois of having a *de facto* system of women in common, so this can form no part of a cogent argument, except to tar the bourgeois with the same brush with which they profess to tar communists.

On the other hand, for communists, the abolition of home education in favour of social education is not a question of severing the role of society in education but in transforming it by rescuing it from the influence of the ruling class. From the point of view of Modern Industrialists, that education

serves them best that transforms children of the proletariat “into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour.”

The penultimate accusation against communists in this section is that they intend “to abolish countries and nationality.” Marx and Engels respond that, since working men have no country, communists cannot take what they do not have. However the concept of nationhood here is used equivocally. In the usual sense, it refers to the collective citizenry of a country. For the authors however, the proletariat must first acquire political supremacy and thus “constitute itself *the* nation... though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.” But this will not do: By this logic if the proletariat were to become the ruling class and thus constitute *the* nation, everybody else, who for whatever reason were not part of this “leading class,” would be excluded from *the* nation; a charge which the authors were trying to escape. It would have been more credible if they had simply denied the charge and instead proposed how communists would have countries and nations better constituted.

The authors conclude their defence here with: “The charges against Communism made from a religious, a philosophical and, generally, from an ideological standpoint, are not deserving of serious examination.” Instead of simply dropping the matter, as befits matters not deserving of serious examination, they proceed to remonstrate with straw man versions of these issues. A single example should suffice:

There are, besides, eternal truths, such as Freedom, Justice, *etc.*, that are common to all states of society. But Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience.

Freedom and justice are not eternal truths; they are human rights, and even if they were eternal truths, such as those of mathematics or logic, they could not be abolished by communists or anybody else. Similarly, religion cannot be abolished; it can only be disbelieved or driven underground. Neither can morality be abolished, either by acting amorally or immorally. As to acting “in contradiction to all past historical experience,” Communism itself has historical antecedents and developed within the greater context of European, and then world history.

Now if you are presented with something that is demonstrably wrong, as this is, and someone is at pains to present to you its mode of demolition, then you are dealing with another straw man fallacy. (Critical Reasoning 04) “But let us have done with the bourgeois objections to Communism,” urge the authors. But what about the non-bourgeois objections, or are all objections to Communism bourgeois?

That aside, this section ends with a prediction of how a communist revolution might be achieved, followed by a ten-point programme listed below. Of course the bourgeoisie are not going to simply cede their capital “except by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property...” Marx and Engels had never witnessed a communist revolution at the time of writing, so clearly they were speculating, not knowing just how anarchic and then despotic such revolutions would become. They certainly would not have sanctioned the notion that absolutely any means justify a revolutionary end. Words like “abolish” and “destroy” pepper the text, however the authors would never have approved of

the abolition or destruction of human life or limb in the name of Communism, though this is hotly contested.

According to Engels, the “programme outlined here is very conservative and preliminary, and would have been much more developed had the *Manifesto* been written later.” (Brians, 2011) In fact several of these points have by now been implemented, even in non-communist countries including South Africa, such as: “a heavy progressive or graduated income tax” and “free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children’s factory labour in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production.” Other points, such as a heavy tax on inheritance and the partial nationalisation of the means of communication and transport by parastatals have also been implemented.

III. Socialist and Communist Literature

This section seeks to distinguish Communism from other historical forms of Socialism. The authors find each form wanting and in turn dismiss them for advocating reformism (the belief that social and economic change can be brought about through gradual change within existing institutions) and for failing to recognise the preeminent role of the working class. (Wikipedia: Communist Manifesto) This however, is very dated and is most usefully read only for its historical significance.

IV. Position of the Communists in Relation to the Various Opposition Parties

This section describes how communists of the day allied themselves with “progressive” revolutionary movements in France, Switzerland, Poland *etc.* However they reserve the right to “take up a critical position...” presumably with respect to any revolution. The authors pay particular attention to Germany because they believed that it was “on the eve of a bourgeois revolution...” According to Brians,

As Marx predicted, Germany [did develop] 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. (Brians, 2011)

Unfortunately the pronouncement that, “Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things,” gives the impression that they were more opportunistically anarchic than democratic when it came to “the property question.”

The final “Working Men of All Countries, Unite!” is misquoted more often than not (see endnote 3) however; it is curious that what the authors regard as axiomatic toward the end of section 2, that “working men have no country” is gainsaid in their rallying cry. Perhaps it is just a rhetorical flourish but strictly, if working men have no country then there would be no workers *from all countries* to unite. On the other hand according to Gasper (1998) “The Manifesto’s final call for international solidarity is not an abstract moral slogan, it is an essential precondition for the transformation of society.”

Contemporary relevance

Although the 75 year great social experiment that was Communism has proven that it is practically unworkable as a political arrangement, that does not mean that it is without redeeming features. Although the slogan used by Marx's in his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program*: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need," is actually a pious aphorism, our baser natures preclude such an arrangement from ever being generally implemented. Most of us, to be honest would, given the opportunity, contribute the absolute minimum and demand the maximum allowable. Socialism, on the other hand, in so far as welfare states are concerned, strives to protect the economic and social well-being of their citizens based on the principles of equality of opportunity and equitable distribution of wealth. (Wikipedia: Welfare state)

According to Marx, Socialism was to have been one stepping stone on the path towards Communism, so that many of the arguments that he raised against Capitalism in favour of Communism are also applicable to Socialism. The most important of these concern the nature of capital. Everyone in a Capitalist state is in thrall to capital, from captains of industry, who can survive as such only to the extent that they can continue to acquire and invest it in the prospect of even greater capital returns, to the wage-slave, who is paid only just so much as to subsist and continue coming to work where he has no choice but to sell his labour below its value to the corporation for whom we works in order for them to realise a profit.

Unlike in Marx's day it no longer even necessary to ensure that workers reproduce to produce another generation of wage-slaves when global overpopulation and robots provide an endless supply of cheap labour. "Over the long-term, this trend [means] that less labour inputs (workers) are required in proportion to capital inputs, increasing unemployment and increasing the size of the reserve army of labour. This process exerts a downward pressure on wages." (Wikipedia: Economic inequality)

Of course governments have intervened by setting minimum wages, but by definition this is always the minimum that most corporations will be willing to pay and if this amount is perceived as excessive, operations will simply be moved off-shore. The same is true for legislation governing the basic conditions of employment.

According to Ian Hunt (2008) questions concerning the justice of redistribution of wealth as well as the environmental consequences of private dominated investment "are even more acute today than in the time Marx wrote." And although these issues are touted in elections, in South Africa and other emerging economies, they are seldom implemented because those corporations who might potentially be adversely affected by such policies are the very ones who fill the coffers of governing political parties. This situation results in a conflict of interest that cannot be resolved except with complete transparency of party political funding.

Finally, some of the injustices that Marx identified have been tackled, even in developing countries, such as the abolition of child labour as well as free basic education and health care. There are now also statutory bodies for the promotion and arbitration of workers' interests' as well as bargaining forums where wage and other benefits can be negotiated with employers who are then legally bound to such agreements. As Marx and Engels recommended, taxation is implemented on a sliding

scale, so that those who earn more are taxed more heavily and those who earn very little are exempted from income tax.

Task

Political Philosophy forms one of modules that you will be required to complete as part of an undergraduate degree in Philosophy and *The Communist Manifesto* remains a key document for study. Do you think that this is still justified? If not do you think that there is a more important document that students of Political Philosophy ought to read instead?

Finally Paul Brians (2011) ends his “Study Guide for *The Communist Manifesto*” with the following searching questions which go to the very heart of the debate surrounding the relevance of Marxist Communism:

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? (Brians, 2011)

Feedback

There are several good reasons as to why specific works remain at the core of the Philosophy syllabus down the generations, while others have fallen away. These include relevance, weight of argument, originality, boldness, historical influence and rhetorical quality. Even if you are appalled by the message of *The Communist Manifesto*, the document still ranks highly on all of the above criteria. Although, in previous study units, we have met political philosophers like John Rawls whose *A Theory of Justice* revolutionised contemporary moral and political Philosophy, he and others however continue to make numerous references to Marx and Communism, so that even if one wanted to replace *The Communist Manifesto* with another contemporary work one would still have to have knowledge of it. Even though the works of Marx and Engels were banned in South Africa during the Apartheid era, *The Communist Manifesto* is a document that cannot simply be wished or legislated away.

As to Brians’ questions above: As so often, there are no stock answers to such questions, only well developed, cogent responses. What follows then is not a series of model answers or a memorandum, only one reflection. Undoubtedly the architects of modern Communism were moved by the ideals of equality and social justice in the face of untold evils that result from the unbridled abuse of capital by an elite minority. This in itself cannot have been a foolish dream or a dream of a fool. Marx was, in many ways, as much an historical visionary as economic theorist whose concepts continue to be taught, not just in Philosophy but in Economics, Politics and Anthropology. If there is any folly in the Communism that Marx described, it is in believing that men capable of acting always unselfishly and according the dictates of reason. It is not that Communism has never truly been implemented or always failed. In fact it continues the flourish in the very sanctuaries that Marx would have disavowed, namely in monasteries of various faiths whose inhabitants live in voluntary mutual service to each other and a higher purpose. Possibly the chief difficulty with Communism as Marx describes it is that it is neither voluntary nor compatible with our baser natures and therein lies

the betrayal. Perhaps not too far in the future, when men have squandered most of the parched Earth's resources and are forced to live collectively or die alone, then genuine Communism might be realized out of necessity rather than revolution.

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