A Modern Interpretation of The Communist Manifesto

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Introduction

Within this paper I present the four sections of *The Communist Manifesto*, analyze how it’s authors, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, impacted political and economic thought, and comment on modern relevance and implications of their work. In order to better understand Marx’s theories of social evolution, one must understand his social and economic influences. Marx and Engels combined their diverse political influences to reach conclusions, most of which were in response to massive political unrest throughout Europe and inhumane working conditions of the working class. The intent of their work was to bridge the gap between poverty and prosperity through eliminating social classes in order to unite workers, releasing them from their chains. One must recognize the historical and social context to further comprehend the implications and desires behind the writing of *The Communist Manifesto*. Though Marx’s many predictions for the outcomes of society and capitalism have not come to pass, it is beneficial to understand further the impact which Marxism and Marx and Engels development of communism had, not only for the economic and political realities of their own time, but for socialist thinkers since. Though communism as Marx and Engels envisioned it never truly came to fruition, their writings would continue to heavily influence political economy through worker uprisings in their own time, as well as in communist movements long after their deaths.

Though many view Marx and Engels’s ideology to be economically illogical, few works receive such attention and scrutiny. In a quote from her article, “*The Communist Manifesto After 150 Years*”, by Ellen Wood, she notes, “At first glance, it seems very unreasonable to judge a small pamphlet—the product of collaboration by two young men very early in their careers, written for a very specific and immediate purpose—by such demanding measures. It is hard to
think of any other classic of Western social thought that has been judged by such sweeping and rigorous standards. The Manifesto stands alone in this respect no doubt because of its tremendous role in the history of a vast political movement which has had an immeasurable influence on the shape of the modern world. More particularly, the Manifesto has been subject to uniquely critical scrutiny because people in power, and their intellectual supporters, have felt that much was at stake in debunking it,” (Wood). Because of the controversial nature of this work, and the massive political movements it has sparked, it is frequently critiqued and analyzed, even though, as Wood remarks, it was moreso a political pamphlet than a lengthy work of economic thought.

**Historical Background**

The Communist Manifesto, written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as a statement of beliefs for a group known as the The Communist League, previously known as the League of the Just, was inspired by a similar document which Engels had written for the group in the year of its inception (Nicolaevsky 3-5). The League, formed by a merger of the Communist Correspondence Committee, with which Marx and Engels were already heavily involved, and the League of the Just (Nicolaevsky). The League commissioned Marx and Engels to write the Communist Manifesto in order to call express their beliefs in a concrete way. A major motivation for the manifesto was to call for liberation of the oppressed working classes, in a time defined by inequality. Published in 1848, Marx and Engels felt that by writing this work, they were more than simply authors writing a mission statement for the league- they saw themselves to be predicting, and sparking, a revolution-and they did indeed, though perhaps not in the way in
which they intended. Although entitled “The Communist Manifesto”, in actuality it did little to lay out what a communist nation would look like in a practical sense, or go about the detailing of how a country would set up a functioning communist society. Though workers did subsequently ignite a labor movement in Europe, communist governments after Karl Marx passed away did not follow the same vision of equality which the Communist Manifesto intended (Marx, Engels).

Marx and Engels believed that the industrial revolution, facilitated by the Bourgeoisie, who control the “means of production” as Marx refers to throughout the entire book, had created the brutal conditions which the working class now faced, and felt that this oppression was the root of all conflict. Additionally, they saw the solution being the abolition of private property, and the revolt of the “Proletariat” against the Bourgeoisie. Their beliefs would become the basis for communism. The manifesto details these beliefs, documents the history leading up to this revolutionary breaking point, explains and refutes previous socialistic views and literature, and predicts the “inevitable” revolution and failure of capitalism (Marx, Engels). Marx, the more brilliant thinker, vocalized the majority of the overarching ideas of the manifesto, while Engels, the more skilled writer, functioned as the facilitator, and editor (Canterbery). The library where Marx and Engels wrote the majority of the book, Chetham Library in Manchester, still features the desk at which they began the manifesto (Nicolaevsky).

I. BOURGEOIS AND PROLETARIANS

The first segment of the Communist Manifesto explores Marx and Engels’ idea that the “Theory of Increasing Misery”, the inevitable outcome of the Proletariat becoming so extremely miserable in their working conditions such that they rise up against the Bourgeoisie, would lead
to the ultimate demise of social classes (Marx, Engels). They argue within this section that, “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,” (Marx, Engels 2). Marx felt that, throughout history, the majority of all conflict was rooted in the inherent evil that is class separation and the problems which arise from it. They further conclude that, because the Bourgeoisie controlled the labor force, the poor conditions of the working class were a direct result of the Bourgeoisie placing a sole emphasis on monetary gain, rather than on relationships, causing them to cease to view the workers as human beings, but rather as machines. Further, we draw from this that the workers are only worth what they produce to the Bourgeoisie (Marx, Engels). They believe that, in the beginning stages of the uprising of the Proletariat against the Bourgeoisie by uniting into a political party through the “union of the workers”, progress is slowed because organization would be sabotaged by competition and disagreement among members. However, this beginning organization by the Proletariat was what Marx believed led to the enactment of the “Ten Hours Act” in 1847, which limited the amount of hours which women and children could work in textile factories to ten hours during the weekday, and eight hours on Saturdays (Oxford Reference). Marx felt that there was an underlying “civil war”, which was on the verge of breaking into a full, violent revolution against the Bourgeoisie. Though this act did begin to attempt to alleviate the harsh working and living conditions, especially for women and children, Marx felt this to be an insufficient and shallow attempt to pacify the working class, rather than a true push to reform society (Gilman).
II. PROLETARIANS AND COMMUNISTS

Marx begins the second section by clarifying how the communist political party and the Proletariat work together toward a common goal. He states that they do not form separate parties, but that their interests are one and the same, apart from the fact that the communists focus not upon the nationality of the oppressed individuals, but rather the core issues at hand. Upon outlining the general goals of both groups, which are to form the Proletariat into an organized class, overthrow the Bourgeoisie, and achieve the upper hand politically, he also states that the core belief of the communists is that there should be no private property (Marx, Engels 23-25). It could perhaps be inferred that part of Marx’s appreciation for these views might stem from his own financial situation, and the fact that he lived most of his life with the financial assistance of Engels, making him more sympathetic to the position of the poor. To him, capital is a social power, rather than a personal one. Marx additionally attacks the character of the Bourgeoisie, comparing their exploitation and lack of value of their wives and children to their exploitation of the Proletariat (Marx, Engels 27).

The premise of communism is that classes and hierarchies should be abolished, yet this statement “...the first step in the revolution by the working class, is to raise the Proletariat to the position of ruling as to win the battle of democracy. The Proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the Bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the Proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible,”(Marx, Engels, 37), seems to indicate that rather than eliminate classes, Marx ultimately feels that power should simply lie with the poor. He assumes inherently with this that the same corruption he feels lies with the
Bourgeoisie is not rooted in power, but wealth and societal normalities, and will not then simply be transferred to the Proletariat with their rise to political power (Marx, Engels 37). In mentioning the Proletariat as “the ruling class”, Marx somewhat discredits his own premise of disassembling the social class structure. Yet, this section does end with the statement “In place of the old Bourgeoisie society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”, which perhaps indicates that the ultimate goal is indeed the elimination of classes, and the instating of the Proletariat as a ruling class is simply a means to that end (Marx, Engels 40).

III. SOCIALIST AND COMMUNIST LITERATURE

Within this section, Reactionary Socialism, Conservative Socialism, and Critical-Utopian Socialism/Communism are discussed. Firstly, Reactionary Socialism encompases the subsets of Feudal Socialism, Petty-Bourgeois Socialism, and German Socialism. While noting that in some way, all these group are indeed fighting against the Bourgeoisie, Marx spends some time questioning the motivations with which they did so (Marx, Engels). Marx discusses how feudal socialists, aristocracy who protested the Bourgeoisie, only disliked the Bourgeoisie because of the revolutionary attitude that it sparks in the Proletariat, rather than taking issue with the core moral violations as the communists do. Petty-Bourgeois Socialism attempted to bring to light the inequalities of society, and aimed to restore the previous means of production.

Conservative, or Bourgeoisie Socialism, Marx argues, did desire to equalize society, but in a way which would bring the Proletariat “up” to the Bourgeoisie quality of life, rather than eliminate the upper classes. Rather than truly seeing a problem with the oppression of the
working class, they largely wished to be rid of the hostile environment which was resulting from the class struggle between the Proletariat and Bourgeoisie (Marx, Engels).

The third category of socialism, Critical Utopian Socialism and Communism, is said by Marx and Engels to be the first attempt on the part of the Proletariat to rise up against the oppression of the Bourgeoisie, but they note that the Proletariat was not yet organized enough to fully execute a revolution. The literature that this group produced questioned society as it was, using their writings to attempt to recreate society, however it was not practical enough to effectively spark a reform (Marx, Engels). Had they foreseen their error, their ideas may have been more successful during their time.

IV. POSITIONS OF THE COMMUNISTS IN RELATION TO THE VARIOUS EXISTING OPPOSITION PARTIES:

“Position of the Communists in Relation to the Various Existing Opposition Parties”

Begins with the statement, “The Communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement,” (Marx, Engels). This section serves as a brief commentary on the communist party’s allegiance with other political parties internationally. Marx and Engels argue that the communists, on the whole, align themselves with whichever political party is fighting for revolution in any given country. Because they view all revolution as being rooted in class struggle, it seems to be their belief that, even if it is a non communist group which is initiating a revolution, that the outcome will eventually be in line with communist goals. This is rooted in that their aim is to fight for the
elimination of private property, of class structure as it currently functioned, for the unionization of workers, as well as the redistribution of capital so that the majority of wealth would no longer be largely in the hands of a small group. This would rid them of the power to negatively impact the living conditions of the lower working class. “In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things, “ (Marx, Engels, 57). The following paragraphs detail political parties such as the Swiss Radicals, Polish Radicals, and German Socialists, and aspects of their views or revolution which the communist party supports.

“The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.” (Marx, Engels). In saying this, Marx and Engels seem to imply that they do not oppose violence, if needed, to overthrow those viewed as oppressing the working class, as well as the fact that they believed life to be so difficult for the proletariat in their current state, they felt them, as a class, to have nothing to lose via a revolution. The manifesto ends with the phrase, “Working men of all countries, unite!”, emphasizing Marx and Engels proposition that communism supersedes nationality or allegiance, uniting rather a group of people facing the same struggles (Marx, Engels 57-58).

Communism Since Marx - The beginning of Modern Socialism

Since its inception, the Manifesto has been a revolutionary piece of literature. The belief that Marxism is no longer thriving and does not continue to influence revolutionists around the
world is an act of folly. Since Marx and Engels first published the Manifesto in 1848, there has been an ever present chatter fueled by their philosophies. Many of those disillusioned with the socialist idea present their demand to “Marxism”, as if they were historical debt-collectors. “You promised us a revolution – where is it? The Manifesto told us that the Proletariat’s victory over capital would open the road to freedom. We have been cruelly disappointed” (Smith). The chief result of Marx’s ideas was that he was able to point out great problems faced by the Proletariat - Marx was only ever able to begin to draw answers for the problems he noted, while the better known dangers of communism have only shown themselves in the last century. The working class has undeniably undergone changes since the times of Marx and Engels (Smith). Around the time of World War II, the greater industrialized nations began the assembly state welfare, combined with a degree of state ownership - the name John Maynard Keynes is nearly synonymous with these policies (Smith). From then on, Marx’s ideas were rebuked by most trained economists and politicians; although they have lingered on in a few lesser developed nations.

Friedrich Engels’ Influence

Friedrich Engels was born in 1820, to upper middle class capitalists (Canterbery). He grew up in the environment of a family marked by moderately liberal political views, a steadfast loyalty to Prussia, and a pronounced Protestant faith (Hammen). His father was the owner of a textile factory in Barmen and also a partner in the Ermen & Engels cotton plant in Manchester, England (Hammen). The contrast between Engels and Marx could not have been greater. Yet, they shared one thing: a detestation of the status quo and a fierce conviction that it must change
Marx had a head too large for his short, stubby frame. His domestic life was a scene of almost continuous squalor, disorder, and poverty (Canterbery). Unlike Marx, Engels was tall, handsome, and athletic. Engels’s father sent Friedrich to Manchester, England, to work in the family textile business, Ermen and Engels (Canterbery). Engels was already a convert to socialist theory, and what he saw in the factories in Manchester confirmed his beliefs (Canterbery). He is credited with the most damning indictment of industrial slums ever written, a staggering description of hopeless filth, despair, and brutality (Canterbery). Engels witnessed pregnant women working in factories, often forced into prostitution. He saw 5 and 6 year old children forced into working physically demanding jobs (Canterbery). He detected class distinctions whereby the paternalism of feudalism had been replaced by the paternalism of the factory owner (Canterbery). In Manchester, he established contacts with people active in the English labour movement at the time and began writing for English socialist publications (Kilroy-Silk). Marx read Engels’ works on these topics and admired them, and their collaboration began, most infamously, in the *Communist Manifesto* (Canterbery). With his background in real life work settings, he was able to guide Marx in a way that attempted to better the quality of life for workers in all parts of society.

**Marx’s Theory of Value**

The labor theory of value is a major pillar of traditional Marxian economics. The theory’s basic claim is simple: the value of a commodity can be objectively measured by the average number of labor hours required to produce that commodity (Prychitko). Marx believed that if a pair of boots takes twice as long as to produce as a shirt, then the boots are twice as valuable as
the shirt (Prychitko). This assertion implies that a pair of boots has a competitive advantage over a shirt in the long run. Although the labor theory of value is demonstrably false, it prevailed among classical economists through the mid nineteenth century (Prychitko).

Whereas Adam Smith was euphoric about an enduring industrialism and David Ricardo was fearful of its premature death because of the political strength of the landowners, Marx saw capitalism as only a necessary evil, to be superseded by a higher state where private property would not exist (Canterbery). Adam Smith, for instance, flirted with a labor theory of value in his classic defense of capitalism, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), and David Ricardo later systematized it in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1817), a text studied by generations of free-market economists (Prychitko). So the labor theory of value was not exclusive to Marxism. Marx did attempt, however, to turn the theory against the defenders of capitalism by pushing the theory in a direction that most classical economists hesitated to follow (Prychitko). Marx argued that the theory could explain the value of all commodities, including the commodity that workers sell to capitalists for a wage (Prychitko). Marx called this commodity “labor power.” Labor power is the worker’s capacity to produce goods and services. Marx, using principles of classical economics, explained that the value of labor power must depend on the number of labor hours it takes society, on average, to feed, clothe, and shelter a worker so that he or she has the capacity to work. In other words, the long-run wage workers receive will depend on the number of labor hours it takes to produce a person who is fit for work. Suppose five hours of labor are needed to feed, clothe, and protect a worker each day so that the worker is fit for work the following morning. If one labor hour equaled one dollar, the correct wage would be five dollars per day.
Across his works, Marx maintained the belief that his theory explained the real value of all products (Prychitko). He called this commodity “labor power.” Labor power, as stated by Marx, is the capacity of a worker to produce a good or a service (Prychitko). Based on classical economics principles, labor power explains that the value of labor power depends on the average number of labor hours it takes to feed, clothe, and shelter a worker so that they may be able to perform their job adequately (Prychitko). Marx then made the distinction between absolute surplus value and relative surplus value. The former is the excess of new value created in a day over the value of the labor power, enlarged merely by the lengthening of the working day (Canterbery). The latter arises out of improvements in technology reducing the labor time required to produce a product and leading to a higher degree of specialization for the worker (Canterbery). To follow up his assertions, Marx posed a series of compelling questions, “if all goods and services in a capitalist society tend to be sold at prices (and wages) that reflect their true value (measured by labor hours), how can it be that capitalists enjoy profits—even if only in the short run?” (Prychitko). How do capitalists manage to squeeze out a residual between total revenue and total costs? How do capitalists manage to squeeze out a residual between total revenue and total costs?” (Prychitko). Marx questions were extremely vague. Capitalists need workers to work more hours than are needed to create the worker’s labor power. If a capitalist pays a wage of $2 per day, he can require workers to work, say, twelve hours per day—a not uncommon workday during Marx’s time (Kilroy-Silk). Hence, if one labor hour equals one dollar, workers produce twelve dollars’ worth of products for the capitalist but are paid only $2. Marx called this difference “surplus value”, which is the source of the owners profits. The bottom line: capitalists extract surplus value from the workers and enjoy monetary profits. In
today's economics terms, this surplus would be the sum of rent, interest, and profit. Although Marx tried to use the labor theory of value against capitalism by stretching it its limits, he unintentionally demonstrated the weakness of the theory’s logic and underlying assumptions (Kilroy-Silk). Marx was correct when he claimed that classical economists failed to adequately explain capitalist profits (Kilroy-Silk).

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, economists began to reject the notion of the labor theory of value (Kilroy-Silk). Economists better understood that capitalists do not aim to exploit their workers, nor do they aim to take advantage of them without giving them proper returns. As a result, economists began to theorize that capitalists earn profits by forgoing some consumption by organizing production and taking associated risks. Of Marx’s theories, his theory of value was by far the most significant and long lasting.

**Concluding Remarks**

Some time after 1848, the chances of a Proletarian revolution occurring in Britain greatly diminished, largely as a result of the "Victorian boom" of the 1850s and 1860s. From 1856 to 1873, Britain's gross domestic product per man-hour grew at an annual rate of 1.3 percent, a rate which was not exceeded until the postwar boom of 1951-73 (Boyer). Marx and Engels original assertion that wages likely declined as capitalism progressed was proven wrong - living standards increased sharply as a result of the boom. (Boyer). The recurring cyclical downturns became more severe, as Marx and Engels had predicted. The increasing prosperity of the working class and the decline in worker militancy both went against the predictions in the *Communist Manifesto* (Boyer). Marx and Engels reached overly pessimistic conclusions about
the economic plight of the working class and overestimated the potential for a Proletarian revolution largely because they were writing during the hungry '40s and because they focused their attention on the cotton industry in north-west England (Boyer). They concentrated on the cotton industry because they viewed it as the apogee of industrial capitalism, the place where "the effects of modern manufacture upon the working class" were "most freely and perfectly" developed (Engels). Marx and Engels’ analysis of British policies and society was largely oversimplified. There was not, even during the hungry '40s, a "veiled civil war" raging between the capitalists and the workers - nor was there either a unified middle class or a unified working class, as Marx and Engels asserted (Boyer). There were significant differences in income between the capitalist middle class, the lower middle class of shopkeepers, clerks, and others, and the professional middle class of doctors, clergymen, lawyers, and public officials (Boyer). The debate within urban town councils over the adoption of sanitary improvements offers an example of the political differences between the capitalist and the professional middle class, on one hand, and the lower middle class, on the other (Hennock). As the increasingly interventionist stance of the government from the 1840s onwards makes clear, Marx and Engels's analysis of British politics and society was greatly oversimplified.

Despite their early predictions, Marx and Engels became very critical of the British working class. In 1878, Marx wrote that the working class "had at last got to the point when it was nothing more than the tail of the Great Liberal Party, i.e., of the oppressors, the capitalists." (Boyer). In 1894, a year before his death, Engels wrote: “One is indeed driven to despair by these English workers...with their essentially bourgeois ideas and viewpoints, with their 'practical' narrow-mindedness” (Boyer). As their hopes for a proletarian revolution in Britain, or elsewhere
in western Europe, declined, Marx and Engels in the late 1870s began to turn their attention to Russia. It was there, 22 years after the death of Engels, that a communist revolution finally occurred (Boyer).

Over 100 years after Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ deaths, they remain two of the most controversial historical figures known to the Western world. Their relentless criticism of capitalism and their corresponding promise of an inevitable, harmonious socialist future was intended to inspire a revolution of global proportions (Boyer). Many people made premature predictions about the death of capitalism during the Great Depression of the 1930’s, and the American Communist Party even gained some adherents, including some Hollywood stars, as Ronald Reagan was to confess, on their behalf (Canterbery). Marx correctly saw the government as the enforcer of property rights and the protector of the entrepreneurs’ economic power (Canterbery). He believed that governments would even go to war to expand the size of markets for products and provide roads, railroads, and canals in the interests of profitable commerce (Canterbery). But by the end of WWII, the mixed enterprise system of the United States bore only a family resemblance to the kind of capitalism that Marx had attacked (Canterbery).

Marx underestimated the resiliency of reformed capitalism, and the effectiveness of appeals to labor (Canterbery). He, too, did not anticipate the aspirations of the working class for a capitalistic lifestyle (Canterbery). The system that Marx wanted overthrown is now vestigial, and the potential for revolution against the industry has consequently diminished (Canterbury). If the American economy today was replaced by a Marxist one, it would not be pure capitalism that would be overthrown; you cannot overthrow what does not exist (Canterbery).
The state of our nations workplaces and quality of life for the workers who occupy them should be of great concern for all peoples in all parts of the world. As economics develops, we may be able to find simpler solutions than Marx suggested for problems we all face in the workplace. The issues which found expression in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, still face humanity on a global scale. Ending the problems faced by society is not a question for a set of doctrines to answer, or for a left wing faction to answer; they must be answered by billions of individual human beings themselves.
Works Cited


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To re-read the Communist Manifesto today is to engage in a strange and paradoxical encounter in time and space. There are some passages which seem

The language of the Communist Manifesto is certainly not that of the media-hungry politician of today's audio-visual age nor is it that of today's "value-neutral" social scientist. But who can deny the vivid imagery of the Communist Manifesto or the power of its arguments? Another text by Marx, the 1859 Preface to a "Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," which is more theoretical than political, has also significantly influenced the interpretation of Marx's intellectual project, historical materialism, and Marxism more generally. This chapter. "The Communist Manifesto" stems from the joint development of ideas between Marx and Engels, but Marx alone wrote the final draft. The text became a significant political influence on the German public and led to Marx being expelled from the country. This prompted his permanent move to London and the pamphlet's 1850 publication in English for the first time. Marx and Engels explain: "The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones." Part 3: Socialist and Communist Literature. In the third part of the manifesto, Marx and Engels present an overview of three types of critique against the bourgeoisie. The Communist Manifesto is Marxist study of human history, the study of change and progress in history along with Marxist concept of class society. In the opening of the essay Marx says that the history of human civilization, he says to develop is the history of class struggle. He says that each and every human society has two classes: the class of haves and the class of have-nots. Marx even described about the rapidly developing modern material world of the bourgeois. The bourgeois is the modern capitalist class, which is the most progressive class because it has made a strong progress in the material world. It has developed different means of property such as transportation, communication, science and technology.