

Some Information about Marxism and the Communist Manifesto

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.

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 an important thinker and writer 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?