

The inevitable revolution: exploring marx and engel's promise

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



As the authors of *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels are known as the initiators of communist and Marxist theories; many of their ideas are still at the heart of contemporary critiques of capitalism's excesses. In their *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels famously predicted that the proletariat of the world would one day rise up in an inevitable revolution against their bourgeois "masters," so to speak, and that then these proletarians would take control of the means of production for themselves, abolish property, and initiate communist societies. The problem with this prediction is that almost two centuries have passed since it was offered in the *Manifesto* and nothing even remotely close to an international proletarian revolution has occurred. Even on a smaller scale, no true communist nation has arisen in this time span either. In light of these facts, some have wondered whether or not Marx and Engels were too bold in their estimation that a proletarian revolution was inevitable. Has the capitalists' control on the means of production become so entrenched that a revolution cannot be mounted? Has not enough time elapsed for the inevitable revolution to yet take place? Or is economic injustice so currently rampant that the members of the proletariat have missed their opportunity to rise up? The answers to these questions are not clear. But in order to explore Marx and Engel's promise of a revolution more closely, this paper intends to analyze why Marx and Engels thought a proletarian revolution would occur in the first place and how the two thinkers might have been mistaken in regard to their predicted revolution as a result of their miscalculating human nature.

First, let us begin by analyzing why Marx and Engels thought that a proletarian revolution was inevitable. The two thinkers thought that once

workers began to band together and realize that they are being economically exploited by the bourgeoisie, then trade unions would be formed in order to organize labor and to strengthen its negotiation position: “[T]he proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalized ... Thereupon the workers begin to form combinations [i. e. trade unions] against the bourgeois.” (Marx & Engels 1948).

Here we can see that the forming of unions is the first foreboding of the revolution for Marx and Engels, because they see such formation as the catalyst that will show the proletariat that they all have the same interests, problems, and abusers. The authors thought that this realization would spread through the proletariat like wildfire until they would inevitably decide to rise up against the bourgeois and depose their oppressors. And such unions would not be necessary in the first place if the bourgeois did not make profits off of the surplus labor of their worker. It is precisely this manipulation, or even stealing, of workers’ surplus labor by the bourgeois that caused Marx and Engels to think a revolution was inevitable, because in their minds the workers would eventually see the inherent injustice of others profiting from the fruits of their labor. Thus it was thought by the two theorists that the proletariat would rise in revolution and stop bourgeois injustices once and for all (Marx & Engels 1948). Ultimately, Marx and Engels thought that unions would lead to the decline of nationalism, which would in

turn set the stage for an international and inevitable uprising against the capitalists (Marx & Engels 1948).

But since the revolution that Marx and Engels forecasted has yet to take place, and since it seems like no such revolution will take place any time soon, if ever, it is likely that the two philosophers made a miscalculation in their understanding of human nature. While reading through the text, I discovered a particular passage that seems to indicate that this reality is actually the case. In this portion of the Manifesto, Marx and Engels predicted that laborers would lose their nationalist attitudes at a rate that simply has not materialized over the past two centuries: “ The workingmen [will] have no country ... National differences and antagonisms between peoples are vanishing gradually from day to day, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto.” (Marx & Engels 1948).

It is here that Marx & Engels might have been too bold in their estimation of human nature. The previous quote seems to suggest that it is imminent that the formation of unions will lead to a dissolution of nationalist interests throughout the global workforce, which would have set the stage for an international proletarian revolution. But unions have formed in the world over the past two centuries and nationalist divisions are still as present throughout the globe as ever. Wars and national disagreements still take place and the laborers of the world still band behind their homelands, regardless of their being in unions. Therefore, it is clear that Marx and Engels

thought that people would be quicker to support a grand and international struggle; what they failed to recognize is that humans are short-sighted creatures who are difficult to rouse for anything that does not immediately affect them. Perhaps they were too hopeful, but it does appear that Marx and Engels believed that people would be able to move beyond their personal and national existences to partake in a global communist struggle; as the past two centuries have shown, people have simply not acted this way.

All in all, no communist nation has ever truly appeared on earth, as no country has ever been organized in such a way that the laborers own the means of production. And since this is the case, obviously no international proletarian revolution has yet occurred either. In my research of *The Communist Manifesto*, I have seen several scholars argue that while Marx and Engels were excellent at critiquing capitalism as an economic structure, they provided few details on how a future of communist societies might emerge (Wolff 2015). Therefore, it does seem that they overestimated peoples' willingness to look at and sacrifice themselves for revolutionary economic change. But it is also perhaps possible that not enough time has yet elapsed for Marx and Engels's revolution to occur and that the process will be much slower than the two thinkers seemed to suggest in *The Communist Manifesto*. But whatever happens in the coming decades, we should not disregard all of Marx and Engels's ideas simply because they may have been flawed. There are still many areas of their theories that are relevant in critiques of capitalism today, and it is still possible that workers

will one day band together across the globe. The reasonable timeframe of such an occurrence, however, is impossible to estimate.

References

Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1948). *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: International.

Wolff, J. (2015). Karl Marx. Retrieved March 18, 2016, from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marx/#1>