

# An analysis of the communist manifesto



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Karl Marx was born in the early 19th century in Germany, where he received his degree in law and philosophy. Shortly after completing university, with his ever growing 'anti-bourgeois sentiment' (Zott, 2006) he found he could no longer believe in the German education system. He turned to journalism where he developed his radical ideas, ultimately he was forced out of Germany, and he soon enthused onto further developing his studies. Marx met his long life friend Fredrick Engels who both had published significant work that questioned the existing European socio-economic system. Fredrick himself observed firsthand the exploitation of blue collar workers under the ruling class in factories, as his father sent him to represent their family in its textile business. Upon meeting in 1844 both found common ground in one and others studies, they began to develop their intellectual partnership, and they came about writing 'The Communist Manifesto' in 1848. Karl Marx is generally considered the prime writer, though some would say it is difficult to underpin where Marx work begins and where Engels work ends.

The political manuscript was written at a time of political upheaval, where they witnessed revolutions, coups and rebellions. Marx was present during the European revolutions of 1848 which started in France. Its 160th anniversary 'The Communist Manifesto' is still relevant till this day, Marx and Engels principles and their ideas of capitalism 'resemble the restless, anxious and competitive world of 20th century global economy' (Cohan, 2000). Economists and political scientists note how the manifesto 'recognized the unstoppable wealth-creating power of capitalism, and predicted it would conquer the world, and warned that this inevitable globalization of national

economies and cultures would have divisive and painful consequences' (Zott, 2006) which is indicative of the text's relevance.

## **Summary of main ideas**

The central premise of 'The Communist Manifesto' can be deduced from Marx's famous generalization 'The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle' (Marx and Engels, 1848) in which essentially Marx is stating that class is the defining feature of the modern industrial society. While the modern society has 'sprouted from the ruins of feudal society this has not done away with the clash antagonisms.' (Marx and Engels, 1848) Marx is arguing that in the earlier periods society was arranged into complicated class structures such as in medieval times there were 'feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices and serfs.' For Marx, he believed class struggle still exists but in this epoch modern class antagonism has become simplified into two classes, the bourgeoisie as the oppressor and proletariat as the oppressed who are in constant opposition to each other.

The manifesto then goes on to state the characteristics of both classes, which is marked by an exploitative relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletarians. The bourgeoisie are the product of several revolutions, the owners of the means of production who have gained momentum with the age of exploration. Marx describes the proletarians as 'a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital' (Marx and Engels, 1848) proletarians are essentially reduced to becoming a 'commodity'. Marx then proceeds to argue that the division of labour has exploited proletarians where they have been

stripped of their identity due to the advent of 'extensive machinery' and so man 'becomes an appendage of the machine.' The workers are powerless to change their circumstance and as the 'repulsiveness of the work increases, the wage decreases.' This system of oppression is sustained by institutions such as the education system (which is part of the superstructure) which reinforces ruling class values. For example,

the concept of a hidden curriculum (Black's Academy, 2010) in educational establishments, whereby everything is designed to prepare students for the future status as a powerless worker. The education institution is designed to benefit the bourgeoisie and uphold the capitalist system, i. e. the hidden curriculum.

Marx then discusses how the development of the industry has increased the proletarians strength, 'the growing competition among the bourgeois, and the resulting commercial crises, make the wages of the workers ever more fluctuating' (Marx and Engels 1848). As there's more of them they are strong enough to unite and voice their struggles over reduced wages. By forming trade unions they stick together to demand to keep up the rate of wages. Marx further argues the larger the union the bigger chance of them changing the system 'workers are victorious'. Although their struggle for equality doesn't lie in the short term effect; it lies in the 'ever-expanding union of the workers.' However, the bourgeoisie try to split the proletarians so they are not united and cannot revolt, as a revolution is the only way in which their circumstances can be changed. This can be substantiated by the fact that Marx says 'continually being upset by competition between the workers.' Marx also describes the process of domination, in that to oppress a class, <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-the-communist-manifesto/>

certain conditions of its 'slavish' existence need to exist, and the 'essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital.' (Marx and Engels, 1848)

## **Criticisms**

The fall of the bourgeoisie 'and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable' (Marx and Engels, 1848). Despite Marx and Engels principles and ideas that the proletarians will overthrow the bourgeoisie, a century on and yet workers in the UK and other industrial societies have not eradicate and revolted against capitalism. Ralf Dahrendorf's studies point out why the Marxist revolution hasn't come about over the 20th century. In 1959 Dahrendorf pointed out four reasons why.

The first one was 'The fragmentation of the capitalist class' (Dahrendorf: 2005) he suggested that previously the means of productions would typically be owned privately by families, now in the 20th century companies and property are greatly owned by stockholders. Secondly, 'white collar work and a rising standard of living' (Dahrendorf, 2005) has transformed Marx's industrial proletariat. 'Workers in Marx's time laboured either on farms or in factories'. They had blue collar or manual occupations; lower standing jobs involving mostly physical labour. Today they hold white collar occupation, higher-prestige work involving mostly mental activity for instance job roles of such; sales, management, and bureaucratic organisations. However, they still perform monotonous tasks like the industrial workers in Marx time, but evidence indicates that these workers see their positions higher than those of their grandparents who led blue collars lifestyles. Thirdly, a 'more extensive worker organisation' exists in which workers have organisational

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strengths, which they were deficient in a century ago. They have 'Trade unions' where they come together and make demands backed with intimidation of 'working to rule' and the relationship between labour and management are usually institutionalised and peaceful. Finally, 'more extensive legal protections' have been more supportive to protect workers' rights and has given workers better access to the courts.

Dahrendorf also states that regardless of 'persistent stratification, many societies have smoothed out some of capitalisms rough edges-and social conflict today maybe less intense than it was a century ago'. (Dahrendorf, 2005) What's more, he argues that despite Marx having witnessed the augmentation of the mass press in his time, however he could hardly have predicted what a major impact media forms would have on us. 'The Growth of music, mass film, and mediated society has allowed us to amuse ourselves to death' and become media-saturated with entertainment which has led people to lose their critical edge for thinking about the nature of their class positions.' (Postman, 1986)

Max Weber also criticised some of Marx's ideas. In particular, he considered Marx's model of two social classes as too simple. Weber viewed social stratification 'as a more complex interplay of three distinct dimensions' (Weber, 2005) the dimensions being; class, status and power. Marx believed that social status and power derived from economic position therefore he didn't find any reason to see it as distinct dimensions of social inequality. Weber opposed, as he recognised that stratification in industrial societies does have characteristically low status uniformity, individuals may have high rank on one dimension of society but a lesser position to another, for

example, an bureaucratic official, may have power but in another dimension in society have little wealth.

## **Analysis**

In spite of all the criticisms aimed at Marx and his work, the communist manifesto remains an extremely influential piece of literature and as a foundation for society. His ideas have lent inspiration to revolutions, coups and political systems, but sadly they have not been sustained, for example the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The USSR was based on a communist system, yet it failed and capitalism moved into the vacuum.

(BBC News, 2010)