

Liberty defined, and
re-defined "the
communist
manifesto" and "on
liberty"



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The Communist Manifesto, written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and first published in 1848 [1], precedes the writing of John Stuart Mill's On Liberty by more than a decade. Although Mill and Marx were both living in England by the time On Liberty was published in 1859 [2], the two authors moved in different circles. Whereas Mill was a high-ranking employee of the East India Company [3], Marx had emigrated to London in 1849 and was living in relative poverty despite his hard work and notoriety [4]. Thus, to Marx and Engels Mill was more a contemporary than a comrade. Like the two authors whose paths overlapped in space and time without really touching, the Manifesto and On Liberty address some of the same themes but interpret them in different ways.

Although both The Communist Manifesto and On Liberty created massive paradigm shifts in the social sciences and they have many themes in common, they were written for different audiences to accomplish different goals. The Manifesto is chiefly a socioeconomic treatise while On Liberty concerns itself more with civic structure and morality. Although politics, economics, and moral philosophy all seek to explain and possibly optimize the behavior of people in groups, they are not the same field. The two papers, accordingly, ought not be considered as being opposed to one another except perhaps on the subject of Kantian moral theory.

Both writers place a high value on personal liberty. They share an optimistic view of a free individual's ability to judge what is best for his or her own best interests, but they also acknowledge the power of "society" at large to act as a moral or legal authority. They both make optimistic predictions about how human beings in a state of freedom (that is to say, not excessively

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oppressed) will choose to conduct themselves. Each author expands on his assumptions to describe an optimal state of affairs that would bring as much liberty as possible to as many people as possible. Yet the authors differ so profoundly in their definition of just what liberty is, and what states of affair are necessary for its existence, that the differences outweigh the similarities. Marx and Engels present liberty chiefly in economic terms. But for Mill liberty is more of a civil and legal phenomenon related to the interactions between a state and the individuals that comprise it.

It is clear that Marx, Engels, and Mill all believe personal liberty is valuable. In *The Communist Manifesto*, the value of being able to do as one likes is assumed to be so obvious that Marx and Engels speak of freedom chiefly in the negative. They depict the proletariat or working class as lacking economic freedom, explaining that they are being “exploited” [5] by the bourgeois class. According to the *Manifesto*, bourgeois control of the means of economic production enables that class to control the price of labor, to the detriment of the laboring proletariat. Forced to compete for work and income opportunities, proletarian individuals are subjected to increasingly degrading, dehumanizing work experiences and are not free to choose more satisfying or profitable work or living conditions. This, according to Marx and Engels, is a bad thing.

In *On Liberty*, Mill describes a struggle between individuals and government so as “to make fitting adjustment between individual independence and social control” [6]. Instead of regarding this struggle as evil or heretical, and instead of condemning people for questioning or seeking to limit the

authority of a government established by divine right, Mill presents the <https://assignbuster.com/liberty-defined-and-re-defined-the-communist-manifesto-and-on-liberty/>

conflict between individuals and their government as natural and appropriate. He thus assigns personal liberty the same moral value as government. He also states clearly that "[i]t is desirable, in short, that in things which do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself." [7]

In both papers, the authors have an optimistic view of a free individual's ability to think rationally and to judge what is best for himself or herself. They are also optimistic about how human beings in a state of freedom would behave. Marx and Engels do not question whether a working-class individual is capable of making intelligent decisions about where and how to live, or how to manage such parts of the means of production as come under his or her control. Once the bourgeoisie are safely eliminated and the last vestiges of bourgeois culture and values swept away, Marx and Engels claim that the proletariat will create a community in which "the free development of each person is the condition of the free development of everyone." [8] In other words, the community as a whole, and the individuals in it, would be so anxious to protect the freedom of their peers that they would not consider themselves free or prosperous as long as any individual were not developing freely to the best of his or her own ability and desire. To this end, the Manifesto proposes free public schooling. The authors assume that people who have access to these education options will choose to exercise them, and that workers will gladly and voluntarily continue to work even without economic pressure or incentive to do so.

Like Marx and Engels, Mill is optimistic about universal education. Although he does not name the government as an appropriate provider of education <https://assignbuster.com/liberty-defined-and-re-defined-the-communist-manifesto-and-on-liberty/>

except to the poorest students, he recommends that it force parents to purchase the education they believe is appropriate and affordable for their children. He offers no suggestion as to exactly how such policies would be enforced or how the public schools would be funded.

Unlike Marx and Engels, Mill acknowledges that some individuals will abuse their liberty. He does not pretend that freedom will produce right and morally appropriate actions except in the long term. Although he dismisses most violations of social norms as “eccentricity”, he admits that when an adult wallows in drunkenness, improvidence, and other destructive behaviors, the people who rely on that adult get hurt. But he stops short of recommending legal sanctions against the irresponsible. Instead, he relies on social “disapprobation”. He proposes to limit the state’s ability to punish an offender proportionately with that offender’s impact on others. Exactly how that impact could be measured or paid back especially in the case of violent crime, Mill does not say. Yet unlike the Manifesto authors, Mill at least acknowledges that free individuals will not always conduct themselves with consideration for the well-being of others.

The authors disagree more than they agree. They do not even define liberty the same way. To Marx and Engels, liberty is an economic matter. A person can choose, wish, and decide, but unless that individual has the economic or physical power to enforce his or her will, the freedom is illusory. This is classic Kantian theory from the Grounding on the Metaphysics of Morals [9]. What a person “ought” to do is constrained by what he or she actually can do with the resources available. Thus, in order to have the freedom to choose where and how to live, a worker must have the economic resources

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to do so. Given that there is obviously a finite amount of wealth in the world, and any individual who has significantly more than another enjoys proportionately more freedom. The wealth disparity accordingly reduces the relative freedom of the have-nots. Thus, the way to create as much "good" as possible for as many people as possible (again, a Kantian precept) is to make sure that everyone has roughly the same resources and assets.

According to Marx and Engels, the only way a worker can enjoy the same level of economic autonomy as a factory owner is if he or she is actually a factory owner, or co-owner, with an equal share in the means of economic production. Hence their recommendation for a massive economic leveling and redistribution, or collectivization, of resource ownership.

To Mill, liberty is a legal and intellectual matter. The first liberties he proclaims are liberty of thought and liberty of speech. Liberty to act (which is of primary concern to Marx and Engels) is more of an afterthought. To Mill, liberty is not an economic matter except to the extent that an individual may choose to engage in work for remuneration, or to invest resources in some profitable venture. Certainly a wealthy person has freedom that a poor person lacks, yet the fact that one person has more financial options than another does not appear to concern him. Mill assumes that people in a free society will exercise such options as are available to them given the education, resources, and opportunities they possess. He at no point suggests that these options are equal, or that they should be. Although Mill does not speak out against wealth redistribution or leveling, he begs the question as to whether economic equality is a necessary precursor to liberty.

To Mill, it is not. Nor is the question a particularly significant one to him, even though to Marx and Engels it's the only question of importance.

Mill's discussion of money and property is limited to the moral and legal obligations he believes an adult in a free society ought to have. For example, Mill recommends that parents be required to provide education and financial support for their children. If one child should therefore benefit from a more thorough (and possibly more expensive) education, creating better opportunities for employment or investment, clearly some families would advance financially from one generation to the next while other families would deteriorate or barely survive. This, to Mill, is not a problem that requires optimization or interference. Instead of redistributing wealth or ownership so as to create the greatest possible good for the greatest number of people, he proposes to remove artificial legal and social barriers to individual achievement or experimentation. Mill's argument is that, in the long run, the best and most sound innovations eventually prevail even when popular opinion is against them. He cites the rise of Christianity, the heliocentric view of the solar system, and various other innovations as evidence that it's impossible to keep a good idea down. Like an early Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Mill asserts that although it's impossible to predict exactly where the next brilliant invention will occur, the best way to cultivate such an advance is to create a fertile environment in which innovation and excellence are encouraged, or at least not punished, and where the incentive to excel is not taken away or artificially reduced. When a person is not allowed to profit from initiative or risk-taking, and when the benefits of it are redirected to others who did not participate in the effort, the incentive to

excel is definitely reduced. This could be one reason why Mill does not address wealth redistribution: his entire essay is so permeated by the laissez-faire mentality that he may actually be begging the question as to whether a modicum of equality is necessary to liberty by assuming that it is not. Only from a position of relative socioeconomic privilege is such a mentality possible.

The authors of both papers purport to be looking at what today might be called "the big picture", but they disagree as to how it is composed. Mill never addresses the issue of whether, in his "free" society, an individual might be constrained by economic forces to the point where he or she cannot survive, much less participate productively. His assessment of one individual's negative impact on another ends at the level of direct interaction and direct responsibility. Mill does not explore indirect causality. He never discusses whether decisions based on individual self-interest might, in the aggregate and on a large scale, might create bigger economic patterns and wide-scale social conditions detrimental to the liberty of far more individuals he or she has never met. Perhaps his faith in an individual's ability to proactively change his or her own situation took precedence, or perhaps he simply met a genuine victim of circumstance. Either way, he ignores complex consequences that are the cumulative effect of millions of smaller individual decisions. Yet Marx and Engels completely understand the phenomenon by which the smaller decisions can, in the aggregate and over a long period of time, create a larger system that takes on a life and behavior of its own, creating an outcome not necessarily predicted or intended by the decision makers. They present the plight of the working

class as the result of generations of self-interested bourgeois decision making.

The authors' proposed mechanisms for achieving liberty in a society could not be more different. Marx and Engels require a massive restructuring of society, possibly with an actual revolution. Mill recommends not revolution but a healthy development of personal initiative on the part of the populace. That a government should exist only at the pleasure of the governed is definitely part of his formula, but whereas Marx and Engels present this consent as something that has not been given, Mill treats it as manifest fact. To Mill, an optimal level of social and legal liberty can be achieved by proactive individuals participating in a democratic process with minimal restrictions on other activities such as commerce and industry.

Both texts point out ways in which contemporary society fell short of the authors' ideal. The social problems addressed by each author are different, yet both are amply supported by primary and secondary sources. Therefore, in order to rank one paper's presentation of the social ills and conflicts in 19th century Europe above the other, it is necessary to determine not which position is better supported by the facts but which facts are the most important.

To Marx and Engels, the most urgent social problems related to liberty are those that affect people's day-to-day lives. In the Manifesto they write about the poor living conditions and the lack of opportunity for the working class, particularly when contrasted with the more comfortable lives of the elite.

Engels performed his own field work and research, describing the unhealthy,

physically dangerous, and degrading lives of the working class in England, the most heavily industrialized nation of the time. His observations in “ The Conditions of the Working Class of England” [10] support the pessimistic view. Although one might be tempted to consider Engels biased in favor of his own research, he was not alone in his criticism and his observations were not unique. Robert Southey likewise condemned the English working-class standard of living, citing not only disease and filth but also the depressing monotony of factory life [11]. Later historians generally agree that working-class life at the beginning of the industrial age was unpleasant and often short. For example, Olwen Hufton supports Marx and Engels in their description of the effect of the European working-class lifestyle on women and families of the early 19th century:

The lower classes, dependent upon a multiplicity of expedients to produce enough to sustain a family, were of course condemned to a remorseless struggle to make ends meet, and poor lists make abundantly evident the plight of families reduced to want by the death, disappearance or incapacity of the male breadwinner. The consequences of a system which insisted that women should work but not have a professional career mentality produced then, as it still does, innumerable victims when the ideal family model crumbled. [12]

John Stuart Mill did not have Marx’s personal experience of poverty or Engels’s desire to personally document the living conditions of the poor. Prior to writing *On Liberty*, he would have been unlikely to have to read Engels’s “ Conditions”, which was not translated into English until 1886 [13] or possibly even 1892 [14] (historians differ) despite the fact that the research was done <https://assignbuster.com/liberty-defined-and-re-defined-the-communist-manifesto-and-on-liberty/>

in England. Mill was born into a privileged family. He received a sound education and lucrative work opportunities, married the widow of a very wealthy man, and served in Parliament [15]. As with Marx and Engels, Mill's perception of the world around him came largely out of his own life experiences. The challenges and injustices he saw as a rising employee (and later an officer) of the East India Company gave him a thorough view of the negative effect a government can have on free enterprise. Yet his later years as a Member of Parliament (MP) enabled him to see government's side of the issues and the necessity of some form of regulation to limit abuses of freedom on the part of industry and individuals. That he should present the most pressing social conflicts of Europe as a contest between individual (or industrial) liberty and government regulation is therefore reasonable.

For Mill to condemn industry or industrial practice would have been absurd. Steeped as he was in logic, reason, and utilitarianism, he would have relied heavily on quantitative measures of the working class quality of life when determining the merits of industrialization. Period author Thomas Babington Macaulay, in "A Review of Southey's Colloquies", cites numerous facts and figures to show that life in industrial England was improving for everyone, even the factory workers, because a rising tide floats all boats. He cites the poor rates as determined by the tax rolls of 1825 and 1828, and also the mortality rate in the industrial centers. Whereas Engels and Southey relied heavily on qualitative statements to paint a picture of working class life, Macaulay is purely quantitative. He does not attempt to argue that the working classes have equal advantages or opportunities, but bases his entire

argument on the fact that the proletarian situation, while not idyllic, is better than it was before industrialization.

Nay, the rate of mortality in those three great capitals of the manufacturing districts is now considerably less than it was fifty years ago, over England and Wales, taken together, open country and all. We might with some plausibility maintain that the people live longer because they are better fed, better lodged, better clothed, and better attended in sickness, and that these improvements are owing to that increase of natural wealth which the manufacturing system has produced. [16]

Citing Neil McKendrick, Sir John Plumb, Roy Porter, and John Brewer, Tim Blanning describes an increase in the standard of living across all classes, at least in terms of material goods. "What in the past had been seen as luxuries now became 'decencies' and what had been decencies now became necessities". [17] In addition, the bourgeoisie now had money to invest. Speculation, previously the province of the independently wealthy, was now accessible to tradesmen and shop owners.

The influx of uninformed, relatively unsophisticated investors to the market, combined with the expansion of European economic interests, made it easy for frauds to wipe out unsuspecting investors. John Law's Mississippi Bubble of 1719 helped bankrupt the French monarchy, and the South Sea Bubble of 1720 bankrupted many British investors. [18] Mill would have seen the demise of the East India Trading Company first-hand, and as an MP from 1865 through 1868, he would have seen the result of the Opium Wars which began in 1839 to protect a British company's monopoly on the Chinese

opium trade. How he would have voted on the 1970 bill to condemn the opium trade is unknown. Sir Wilfred Lawson's bill was soundly defeated 151 to 47 due to the huge taxes made by the drug sales [19]. Yet this is the environment in which Mill operated. People fought and died for British commerce and British industrial and economic interests. Also, in the not too distant past, philosophers such as Mill had been put to death for daring to speak their minds, especially on the subject of religion. To Mill, the conflict between the interests of the individual and that of the state was a life-or-death struggle, and freedom of speech and thought were the most fundamental liberties and the most deserving of protection. The troubles of the working class, removed as they were from his daily life, would have been just as academic to him as Utilitarianism would have been to a workers in Engels's father's factory.

Ultimately, the authors created their definitions of liberty based on what they themselves understood and valued. Their understandings, and their values, came out of their own personal experience. That both authors' definitions of liberty are supported by both primary and secondary sources is evident. Yet both Mill's position and the Marxist position are dialectical enough to be both supported and refuted by primary sources. So the fact that Mill and the writers of the Manifesto lived in different worlds with radically different influences does not discredit the world view of either. The question as to which definition of liberty best suits the social and economic issues of the times therefore depends on which world view, and which set of values, best aligns with the reader's own point of view.

Endnotes

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[1] Morgan, Michael L. (ed). *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*. p. 1158; Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co. 1992.

[2] *ibid.* p. 1043

[3] *ibid.* p. 1042

[4] *ibid.* p. 1159

[5] Marx, Karl; Engels, Friedrich. *The Communist Manifesto*. From *The Collected Works of Marx and Engels*. International Publishers, Inc., 1975. Reprinted by Hackett Publishing Co., 1992. See Morgan, *op. cit.* [1], p. 1195

[6] Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. From 1869 4th ed., Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer. Reprinted by Hackett Publishing Co., 1992. See Morgan, *op. cit.* [1], p. 1047

[7] *ibid.* p. 1078

[8] Marx, *op. cit.* [5] p. 1207

[9] Kant, Immanuel. *Grounding on the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by James W. Ellington. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co., 1981. Reprinted by Hackett Publishing Co., 1992. See Morgan, *op. cit.* [1], p. 1032.

[10] Engels, Friedrich. *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. (1845). Translated by W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (1958). Reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5th ed., vol. 2. W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., Penguin Books of Canada, Markham, Ontario, 1962. pp. 1625-33.

[11] Southey, Robert. *Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*. (1829). Reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5th ed., vol. 2. W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., Penguin Books of Canada, Markham, Ontario, 1962. p. 1622.

[12] Hufton, Olwen. *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe 1500-1800*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1996. p. 175

[13] Blanning, Tim. *The Pursuit of Glory: The Five Revolutions That Made Modern Europe 1648-1815*. Penguin Books, New York, NY. 2007. p. 126

[14] *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5th ed., vol. 2. W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., Penguin Books of Canada, Markham, Ontario, 1962. p. 1625.

[15] Morgan, op. cit. [1], p. 1042-43.

[16] Macaulay, Thomas Babington. *A Review of Southey's Colloquies*. Published in *The Edinburgh Review*, 1830. Reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5th ed., vol. 2. W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., Penguin Books of Canada, Markham, Ontario, 1962. p. 1621.

[17] Blanning, op. cit. [13], p. 137

[18] Ferguson, Niall. *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*. Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2008. pp. 152-157

[19] Hanes, W. Travis III., Sanello, Frank. *The Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another*. Sourcebooks, Inc. USA, 2002. pp. 293-294.

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