

The Communist Manifesto

By Roger Spalding, History Review 2000

Roger Spalding introduces one of the most important publications in modern world history.

The Communist Manifesto was a product of the social, economic and political turmoil that characterised Europe before 1850. Both of its authors, Marx and Engels, were touched by elements of this turmoil. Karl Marx, born in 1818, came from the Rhineland, an area occupied by the French during the Napoleonic Wars. During this period the French abolished feudal restrictions, introduced religious toleration and secularised the state. Many, like Marx's father, benefited from this liberal regime. When, after Napoleon's defeat, the Rhineland passed under Prussian control, Hirschel Marx, Karl's father, abandoned Judaism for Christianity to retain the right to practise as a lawyer. Friedrich Engels, born in 1820, came from a family of German industrialists: he had, therefore, first-hand knowledge of the effects of rapid industrialisation. In 1842 Engels moved to Manchester to work at the family cotton mill. This took him to the heart of the world's first industrial nation.

Origins of the Manifesto

Like many young Germans, Marx and Engels were profoundly influenced by the German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1831). Confronted by the upheavals of the French Revolution, he developed a theory of history that explained change. This was Hegel's dialectic. Throughout history, he argued, there was an interaction of ideas (the dialectic) that led to change. This was expressed as a thesis (original idea) conflicting with an antithesis (new idea) to produce a third idea, a synthesis, different from either thesis or antithesis. A concrete example of this process was his belief that the conflict between the absolute freedom of post-revolutionary France and the absolute monarchy of Prussia had led to the synthesis that was the 19th-century Prussian state. This was a state where citizens enjoyed greater freedoms than in the past, but where, unlike in France, freedom consisted of accepting one's duty to obey the state.

Hegelianism could, however, be interpreted in two ways. The Prussian state saw it as confirming its legitimacy, believing that Hegel had argued that Prussia represented an ideal state at the end of history. Against this, German radicals, the 'Young Hegelians', stressed the dynamic element of Hegel's philosophy and argued that the Prussian state was simply one stage of an on-going historical process, or dialectic. This perspective provided a philosophical justification for demands for greater political freedom and social reforms. Independently, both Marx and Engels gravitated towards the Young Hegelians.



When Marx left University in 1841, his radical opinions prevented him from taking up an academic career, and so he turned to journalism. By 1842 he was editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*. This experience led Marx to question the validity of Hegel's stress on the importance of ideas (Idealism). The practical problems that he confronted opened up the possibility that it was the physical conditions of life that brought about historical change. At the same time Engels' British experience was moving him towards materialism. In his 1845 work, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, he argued that 'The condition of the working class is the real basis and point of departure of all social movements...' [Frederick Engels *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Panther, 1969) p.18]

Collaboration between Marx and Engels began in Paris in 1844. Marx had gone there, following the suppression of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, to edit the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbucher*. Paris also attracted him because it was the centre of Europe's revolutionary tradition, and it gave him the opportunity to meet French socialists. While there he embarked on an intensive course of study which resulted in his final rejection of Idealism. States were not shaped by ideas, he decided, but by the material interests of the dominant groups in society. Hence in a capitalist society the state will embody the values of the capitalist. From this it followed that society could only be changed by a grouping with no material stake in it. This, according to Marx was the working class.

In 1844 Engels wrote an article for the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbucher* which accorded very well with Marx's developing viewpoint. When Engels visited Paris they established a life-long partnership. Initially they worked on clarifying their philosophical views, producing works such as *The German Ideology*. In 1847 they made contact with and joined an organisation of working-class German exiles, the League of the Just. A number of changes made at the 1847 congress of the League indicate their growing influence within it. The name, for example, was changed to the Communist League. In the aftermath of these changes, Marx and Engels were invited to draft a statement of aims. This was the genesis of *The Communist Manifesto*.

The message of the Manifesto

The Manifesto, primarily Marx's work, is a short accessible document providing the clearest outline of Marxist principles available. Marx produced a useful summary of its main points in 1852:

'What I did that was new was to prove (1) that the existence of classes is only bound up with particular, historic phases in the development of production; (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to classless society.' [Karl Marx, letter to J. Weydemeyer, 5th March 1852 in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels Selected Works Vol.1* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977) p.528.]

Marx's comments are significant because they indicate what he saw as important in the *Manifesto* and, at the same, they provide a useful starting point for a consideration of the work.

The opening sentence of the *Manifesto* states: ‘The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle’. It goes on to argue that the nature of that class struggle varies according to the nature of the principal form of production. Hence in feudal societies, where the main form of production was agriculture, the class struggle was between those who owned the land and those who worked on it, between, that is, the lord and the serf. However, Marx had learnt from Hegel that history was not static, and he argued that out of this conflict emerged a third class, the bourgeoisie. These were people who had left agriculture to concentrate on manufacture and commerce. Over time, stimulated by the global expansion of the 18th century, the bourgeoisie reached a point where its further progress was inhibited by the priorities of the feudal state. In 18th-century France, for example, the bourgeoisie provided a disproportionate share of taxation and had to endure a large number of controls and restrictions on commerce. This conflict culminated in the French Revolution of 1789, where the bourgeoisie rose up and destroyed the aristocracy and the feudal state.

Within bourgeois societies class conflict still continued, but now the contest was between the bourgeoisie, who owned the means of production, primarily in the form of industrial factories, and the proletariat or working class, which owned nothing except its ability to work. This conflict flowed from what Marx saw as the contradictions of bourgeois society. ‘Capitalism’, the name that Marx used for the economies developed by the bourgeoisie, was a profit-driven system that was forced constantly to expand. This it did by creating a global market, dividing labour processes into simpler and simpler tasks, and deploying new technology.

At the same time all relationships were reduced to a question of cash; labour became a commodity to be bought and sold at the market rate. The mechanisation and simplification of labour processes, which reduced the need for skilled workers, tended, according to Marx, to reduce wages to the lowest possible level. So, as the ability to produce goods expanded more rapidly than ever before, particularly in Britain, the ability of the proletariat to enjoy the benefits of that expansion declined. Capital, the wealth created by capitalism, was, Marx argued, the product of the proletariat’s labour, but its benefits were enjoyed, as private property, principally by the bourgeoisie.

Capitalism suffered from further problems in Marx’s view, like crises of over-production. These occurred not because more goods had been produced than could be used, but because there were not enough people to buy them at prices that would sustain profits. This was the product of a contradiction between society’s capacity to produce goods and the social organisation that regulated the distribution of goods. Just as the feudal state blocked the advance of bourgeois commercial interests so in the 19th century, Marx contended, bourgeois society prevented the full benefits of industrialisation reaching the population at large. This contradiction was the basis of the revolution that would lead to the rule, or dictatorship, of the proletariat.

Marx’s view of history is a materialist version of the Hegelian dialectic (and hence is often called dialectical materialism), where the conflict is between social classes not ideas. Like Hegel, Marx points to the possibility of the end of history. This will be initiated by the proletarian revolution that will overthrow the bourgeoisie. Marx is not very specific about the nature of this revolution, although he does predict ‘despotic inroads on the rights of property’. Marx saw such measures as part of a process that would lead to the national

control of all industry. Once that had occurred the unequal distribution of goods that had characterised previous societies would also disappear. Material plenty, created by a modern industry controlled for the benefit of society as a whole, would also ensure the disappearance of class conflict, and without such conflict historical change, would, in his view, cease. But the end of old-style history (with its inequality, exploitation and alienation) would be the beginning of a new history (of human freedom and fulfilment).

The Manifesto in history

The bulk of the analysis of the Manifesto is in the first two sections. A third section critically examines other forms of socialism. This is shorter than the others, and there is a tendency to see it as less important. However, what it demonstrates is that Marxism had to compete with a variety of other socialist theories and movements. In 1848 it did not seem that Marx and Engels had succeeded. The *Manifesto* did not influence any of the revolutions of that year. The *Manifesto* seemed 'doomed to oblivion'. Yet in 1888 Engels claimed that it 'is undoubtedly the most widespread, the most international of all Socialist literature'. [F. Engels, preface to 1888 English edition of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels *The Communist Manifesto* (Penguin, 1967) p.61]

Why did the *Manifesto* survive and thrive? The answer would seem to be that it made sense of the experiences of growing numbers of industrial workers in Europe and the United States. It explained why Capitalism emerged, it located industrial conflicts within the context of the class-struggle, and it claimed to demonstrate how that class struggle would result in the victory of the proletariat. This relevance to their experience also explains why the socialist parties of late 19th-century-Europe were overwhelmingly Marxist in character. The international appeal of the Manifesto was undoubtedly enhanced by its claim that the whole working class, world-wide, had a stake in overthrowing capitalism. Hence its famous rallying-cry: 'The proletariat have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!'

Even the *Manifesto's* vagueness on issues like the nature of the proletarian revolution helped its survival, as it enabled revolutionary groups like the Bolsheviks and parliamentary parties like the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) to claim the *Manifesto* as their inspiration. The SPD did not formally renounce Marxism until 1959. Even a non-Marxist body like the British Labour Party owes a debt to Marx and Engels. Clause 4 of its 1918 constitution talked about securing 'for producers by hand or brain the full fruits of their industry ... upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production'. [*The Labour Party Constitution* (The Labour Party, 1918) p.4] This is clearly very close to Marx's call for Capital to be 'converted into common property, into the property of all members of society'. [K.Marx and F. Engels *op.cit.* p.97]

Ultimately the historical significance of the *Communist Manifesto* is that virtually all socialist parties, from the Communist Party of China to the tiniest Trotskyist sect, owe a lesser or greater debt to the ideas expressed in its pages. At a less elevated level the historical approach that it pioneered, of relating all historical developments to the social structure in which they occurred, is now used in all forms of history – from costume dramas to academic monographs. Marx and Engels may not have changed the world, but they certainly changed the way we interpret it.

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The Communist Manifesto – Questions

1. When and where was Karl Marx born?
2. Using examples, explain what Georg Hegel's (1770-1831) theory of history is.
3. What job did Marx take after University in 1841?
4. How did that job change Marx's belief in Hegelian idealism?
5. When did Marx go to Paris and why?
6. How did Marx's ideas change in Paris?
7. How did Marx and Engels meet?
8. What were the main points of the 'Communist Manifesto'?
9. What is the opening statement of the Communist Manifesto?
10. What is meant by 'class struggle'?
11. According to Marx, how did the 'bourgeoisie' emerge?
12. Which 'class' did the bourgeoisie struggle with and why?
13. How did class conflict continue in bourgeois society?
14. Who owned the 'means of production' in bourgeois society?
15. How did Capitalism change human relationships?
16. How and why was bourgeois Capitalism unfair to the working class?
17. According to Marx, what other problems did Capitalism suffer from?
18. What is Marx's view of history?
19. According to Marx, how would the 'end of history' be achieved and what would it be like?
20. Why did the Communist Manifesto survive and thrive?
21. Why is the Communist Manifesto so historically significant?