

communist manifesto main arguments on critique of existing order

The Communist Manifesto, penned by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, remains a foundational text in political and economic thought, offering a scathing critique of the existing societal order of their time. This seminal work dissects the inherent contradictions and injustices embedded within capitalist society, arguing for a fundamental transformation of power structures and economic relations. By examining the historical progression of class struggle and the evolution of economic systems, the Manifesto lays bare the mechanisms through which the bourgeoisie exploits the proletariat. Understanding the main arguments of the Communist Manifesto on its critique of the existing order is crucial for grasping its enduring influence and its relevance to contemporary discussions about inequality, power, and social change. This article will delve into these core arguments, exploring the Manifesto's diagnosis of societal ills and its proposed radical solutions.

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Understanding the Communist Manifesto's Critique of the Existing Order

The Communist Manifesto presents a systematic and profound critique of the prevailing socio-economic order, particularly the burgeoning capitalist system of the 19th century. At its heart, the critique centers on the inherent exploitative nature of capitalism, driven by the relentless pursuit of profit and the accumulation of capital. Marx and Engels meticulously detail how this economic

system, while lauded for its revolutionary productive forces, is fundamentally built upon the subjugation of one class by another. The Manifesto argues that the "existing order" is not a natural or inevitable state of affairs but a historical construct, characterized by deep-seated class divisions and antagonism. This critical analysis is not merely descriptive; it is prescriptive, outlining a historical trajectory that necessitates the overthrow of this exploitative system. The document's central thesis is that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles, a concept that forms the bedrock of its critique of the existing order.

The Centrality of Class Struggle: The Engine of History

One of the most potent and enduring arguments within the Communist Manifesto is its assertion that class struggle is the primary driving force of historical change. Marx and Engels famously declared, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." This statement encapsulates their materialist conception of history, which posits that economic relationships and the conflicts arising from them are the fundamental determinants of societal development. The Manifesto argues that in every historical epoch, there has been a dominant class that controls the means of production and an exploited class that must sell its labor power to survive. The critique of the existing order is therefore intrinsically linked to the identification and analysis of these class antagonisms. In the bourgeois society of their time, this struggle was primarily between the bourgeoisie, the owners of capital and the means of production, and the proletariat, the wage laborers who possessed only their labor power to sell.

The Bourgeoisie as a Revolutionary Force

The Manifesto acknowledges that the bourgeoisie, in its ascendancy, played a historically revolutionary role. It abolished feudalism, shattered patriarchal relations, and created unprecedented productive forces and global interconnectedness. However, this revolutionary phase was, according to Marx and Engels, unsustainable. The very success of the bourgeoisie in developing capitalism created the conditions for its own downfall. The immense wealth and power concentrated in the hands of the few led to the mass impoverishment and exploitation of the many. This inherent contradiction forms a crucial part of their critique of the existing order: the system that liberated humanity from feudalism ultimately created a new, more pervasive form of subjugation.

The Proletariat as the Revolutionary Class

Conversely, the Manifesto identifies the proletariat not just as a victim of the existing order but as its ultimate gravedigger. As capitalism develops, it concentrates large numbers of workers in factories, fostering a sense of collective identity and shared grievance. The proletariat, by its very position within the capitalist system, is alienated from the products of its labor, from the process of labor, from itself, and from its fellow human beings. The critique of the existing order, from the proletarian perspective, is therefore an experience of alienation and dehumanization. The Manifesto posits that this exploited class, once it becomes aware of its collective power and its common interests, will inevitably rise to overthrow the bourgeoisie and establish a new, classless society.

Critique of Bourgeois Society: Exploitation and Alienation

The core of the Communist Manifesto's critique of the existing order lies in its analysis of the exploitative and alienating nature of bourgeois society. Capitalism, as described by Marx and Engels, is a system predicated on the extraction of surplus value from the labor of the working class. This surplus value, the difference between the value of what a worker produces and the wages they receive, is the source of profit for the capitalist. The Manifesto argues that this relationship is inherently unjust, as the workers who create all the wealth are denied its full benefits, while the capitalists, who merely own the means of production, reap the rewards.

Exploitation through Surplus Value

The concept of surplus value is central to the Manifesto's critique. It explains how the capitalist class maintains its dominance and accumulates wealth. Workers are compelled to sell their labor power, a commodity like any other, but one with a unique ability to create more value than it costs to reproduce. The capitalist purchases this labor power for a set period and then utilizes it to generate products whose market value exceeds the cost of labor and materials. This excess value is appropriated by the capitalist, constituting profit. The Manifesto argues that this is not merely an economic transaction but a fundamental exploitation, as it represents the unpaid labor of the proletariat being systematically converted into the capital of the bourgeoisie. This extraction of surplus value is a cornerstone of the Manifesto's argument against the legitimacy of the existing order.

Alienation of the Worker

Beyond economic exploitation, the Manifesto also highlights the psychological and social alienation experienced by the proletariat under capitalism. In pre-capitalist societies, artisans and farmers, while often exploited, had a more direct connection to their labor and its products. The industrial capitalist system, however, reduces the worker to a mere cog in a vast machine. The division of labor becomes so minute that individual workers lose any sense of craftsmanship or ownership over the final product. Their labor becomes monotonous and repetitive, devoid of creative fulfillment. This alienation extends to their relationships with fellow workers, as competition is fostered rather than cooperation. The Manifesto's critique of the existing order thus encompasses not only the material deprivations but also the profound spiritual and psychological toll of capitalist production.

The Bourgeoisie: The Revolutionary Class and its Limitations

The Communist Manifesto dedicates significant attention to the role of the bourgeoisie, acknowledging its historical significance while ultimately condemning its system. The authors recognize that the bourgeoisie, through its relentless drive for innovation and market expansion, dismantled the feudal order, unleashing productive forces previously unimagined. This disruptive and transformative energy is a key element in understanding Marx and Engels' historical materialism – the idea that economic structures shape society and that change often comes through

the disruption of existing power dynamics.

The Globalizing Tendency of the Bourgeoisie

A major point of the Manifesto's critique of the existing order is the bourgeoisie's inherent need to constantly revolutionize the instruments of production, and with them the relations of production, and consequently all the social relations. It points out that the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, which means the relations of production, and thereby all the social relations. This inherent drive leads to a globalizing effect, breaking down national barriers and creating a world market. While this creates unprecedented wealth and interconnectedness, it also spreads the capitalist mode of production, including its exploitative relations, to every corner of the globe. The Manifesto sees this as a double-edged sword: it sows the seeds of its own destruction by creating a global proletariat, but it also intensifies exploitation on a massive scale.

Inherent Contradictions and Crises

The Manifesto argues that bourgeois society is inherently unstable, prone to cyclical crises of overproduction. The relentless drive to produce more and more, coupled with the limited purchasing power of the masses due to their exploitation, leads to periods where markets are flooded with goods that cannot be sold. These crises, far from being anomalies, are seen as inherent features of capitalism that expose its fundamental contradictions. The critique of the existing order highlights how these crises lead to increased unemployment, misery, and social unrest, further radicalizing the proletariat and pushing it towards revolution.

The Proletariat: The Revolutionary Class and its Destiny

The Communist Manifesto positions the proletariat not merely as the oppressed but as the ultimate agent of historical change. Its critique of the existing order finds its ultimate expression in the proletariat's potential to transcend its exploited status and create a new society. Unlike other oppressed classes in history, the proletariat, according to Marx and Engels, has nothing to lose but its chains. Its position in the capitalist system, characterized by mass production, collective labor, and shared exploitation, fosters a class consciousness that can eventually lead to revolutionary action.

The Development of Class Consciousness

The Manifesto emphasizes that the proletariat's revolutionary potential is realized through the development of class consciousness. Initially, workers may see their struggles as individual or localized. However, as capitalism progresses, the concentration of workers in factories and urban centers, coupled with the recurring crises and shared experiences of exploitation, fosters a collective awareness of their common interests and their opposition to the bourgeoisie. Trade unions and political parties emerge as crucial institutions in this process, organizing workers and articulating their demands. The critique of the existing order, when internalized by the proletariat, transforms it

from a passive victim into an active force for change.

The Inevitability of Revolution

Building upon the concept of class consciousness, the Manifesto argues for the historical inevitability of proletarian revolution. The inherent contradictions within capitalism, the intensified exploitation, and the growing power and organization of the proletariat will, they contend, inevitably lead to a showdown. The existing order, incapable of resolving its internal conflicts, will be overthrown by the class that it has most thoroughly oppressed and alienated. This revolution is not merely a political coup but a fundamental transformation of the economic and social system, leading to the abolition of private property and the establishment of a communist society.

The Manifesto's Analysis of Other Oppositional Classes

While focusing on the central conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the Communist Manifesto also analyzes other social classes that exist within bourgeois society. The critique of the existing order extends to understanding how these other groups relate to the dominant capitalist system and their potential roles in the impending revolution. Marx and Engels were keen observers of the complex social stratification of their era, and their analysis reveals a nuanced understanding of how different segments of society experienced the changes wrought by capitalism.

The Declining Middle Class (Petty Bourgeoisie)

The Manifesto describes the petty bourgeoisie, or the small traders, shopkeepers, artisans, and peasants, as a class in decline under capitalism. While some members might aspire to join the ranks of the bourgeoisie, most are progressively being ruined by competition from large-scale capitalist enterprises. The Manifesto suggests that these elements often act in a reactionary manner, attempting to turn back the wheels of history to restore a previous economic order that benefited them. However, it also notes that due to their precarious position, some may eventually align with the proletariat, particularly as their economic situation deteriorates.

The Lumpenproletariat

The Manifesto also refers to the lumpenproletariat, the "dangerous class," the social scum, the passively rotting masses thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society. This includes vagrants, criminals, and others who are largely excluded from the formal economy. The Manifesto views this class as largely unorganized and potentially susceptible to manipulation by the bourgeoisie, used as tools for counter-revolution. While they might be drawn into revolutionary movements due to their desperation, their lack of a clear class interest and their marginalization prevent them from being a truly revolutionary force in their own right.

Key Criticisms of the Existing Order in the Communist Manifesto

The Communist Manifesto offers a multi-faceted critique of the existing order, identifying fundamental flaws that it believes are inherent to capitalist society. These criticisms are not mere complaints but are rooted in a deep analysis of economic relations and historical development. Understanding these core criticisms is essential to grasping the Manifesto's call for radical social transformation.

The Instability and Cyclical Crises of Capitalism

As previously mentioned, the Manifesto criticizes the inherent instability of capitalism, characterized by recurrent economic crises. These crises of overproduction, where supply outstrips demand, are seen as a direct consequence of the system's logic. The relentless pursuit of profit compels capitalists to expand production, but the system's built-in mechanism of exploitation limits the effective demand for these goods. The resulting gluts lead to factory closures, mass unemployment, and widespread suffering, demonstrating the inefficiency and irrationality of the existing order.

The Global Spread of Exploitation

The Manifesto critiques the bourgeoisie's tendency to extend its reach globally, exporting its mode of production and its exploitative relationships to all corners of the world. While this process creates a global market and fosters economic development in some areas, it also serves to exploit weaker economies and create a global reserve army of labor. The critique here is that the capitalist system, by its very nature, perpetuates and intensifies exploitation on an international scale, dragging all nations into its orbit regardless of their desire or readiness.

The Impoverishment and Alienation of the Working Class

At the heart of the critique is the condition of the proletariat. The Manifesto argues that capitalism, despite its productive capacity, leads to the relative and absolute impoverishment of the working class. Workers are paid just enough to survive and reproduce their labor power, while the surplus value they create is appropriated by the capitalists. This economic exploitation is compounded by the alienation of labor, as discussed earlier, leading to a dehumanizing existence for the vast majority of society. The critique is fundamentally about the unjust distribution of wealth and the detrimental impact of the system on human dignity and well-being.

Abolition of Private Property: The Cornerstone of Change

The most radical and often misunderstood proposal in the Communist Manifesto is the abolition of private property. This is not a call for the confiscation of personal possessions but rather for the abolition of bourgeois private property, which refers to the private ownership of the means of production by capitalists. The Manifesto argues that this form of property is the very foundation of

class exploitation and that its abolition is a necessary precondition for creating a more just and equitable society.

Distinction Between Personal and Bourgeois Property

Marx and Engels are careful to distinguish between personal property, such as one's home, clothing, or tools of a craftsman, and bourgeois private property, which refers to the ownership of factories, land, and other means of production by a capitalist class. They state explicitly, "We Communists have been reproach'd with the desire of abolishing the right which man is supposed to make his very own personal conquest by his labour, and which is supposed to be the groundwork of all personal freedom, activity and independence. But all property which a man makes himself is indeed the property of the wage-labourer, i.e. the property resulting from his own labour and from the alienation of his labour-power. The communist appropriation, the property of communist society, is indeed the property of the wage-labourer, i.e. the property resulting from his own labour and from the alienation of his labour-power." The critique of the existing order is therefore a critique of the private ownership of the means of production by a class that does not labor.

Communism as Collective Ownership

The abolition of bourgeois private property, according to the Manifesto, would lead to the establishment of collective ownership of the means of production. This would mean that the factories, land, and resources would be owned and controlled by society as a whole, or by the workers themselves, rather than by a small capitalist class. This collective ownership would eliminate the basis for exploitation, as the surplus value generated by labor would no longer be appropriated by private individuals but would be used for the benefit of society. The critique of the existing order thus culminates in this fundamental proposal for economic reorganization.

The Specter of Communism: Fear and Misunderstanding

The Communist Manifesto famously begins with the statement, "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism." This opening highlights the widespread fear and misunderstanding surrounding communist ideas in the 19th century. The ruling classes actively propagated negative stereotypes and distortions of communism to discredit it and maintain their own power. The Manifesto seeks to address these misrepresentations and clarify the true aims of communism as a response to the critique of the existing order.

Bourgeois Misrepresentations of Communism

The Manifesto meticulously debunks common accusations leveled against communists, such as the charge that they seek to abolish individuality, the family, personal property, nationality, and morality. Marx and Engels argue that these accusations are hypocritical, as the bourgeoisie itself has already undermined many of these concepts in its pursuit of profit. For instance, they argue that the bourgeois family is merely a tool for maintaining inherited wealth and that the bourgeois morality is a set of justifications for exploitation. The critique of the existing order, therefore, also

involves a critique of the ideological superstructure that supports it.

Communism as a Necessary Historical Stage

The Manifesto presents communism not as an arbitrary or utopian ideal but as a necessary historical stage that will emerge from the contradictions and antagonisms of capitalism. It is not a sudden invention but the logical culmination of historical development. By understanding the critique of the existing order, one can see how communism is presented as the solution to the problems created by capitalism, offering a path towards a more rational, equitable, and humane society. The fear of communism, the Manifesto implies, is a fear of losing privilege and power, rather than a genuine concern for societal well-being.

The Communist Program: Proposals for a New Society

Following its critique of the existing order, the Communist Manifesto outlines a series of practical measures or a program that the proletariat, upon seizing political power, would implement to transition towards a communist society. These proposals are intended to dismantle the structures of bourgeois dominance and lay the groundwork for a new economic and social organization.

Transitional Measures in the Manifesto

The Manifesto lists ten specific measures, acknowledging that these may vary in different countries. These include:

- Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes.
- A heavy progressive or graduated income tax.
- Abolition of all rights of inheritance.
- Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels.
- Centralisation of credit in the hands of the state, by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly.
- Centralisation of the means of communication and of transport in the hands of the State.
- Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State; the bringing into cultivation of waste-lands, and the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan.
- Equal liability of all to labour. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.
- Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country, by a more equable distribution of the population over the country.
- Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children's factory labour in its

present form. Combination of education with industrial production, &c.

These proposals are designed to fundamentally alter the economic landscape, weaken the power of capital, and direct resources towards the common good. The critique of the existing order directly informs these proposed solutions.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of the Manifesto's Critique

The Communist Manifesto's critique of the existing order remains a potent and influential analysis of capitalist society. Its core arguments concerning class struggle, exploitation through surplus value, alienation, and the inherent contradictions of capitalism continue to resonate in contemporary discussions about economic inequality, wealth distribution, and the power of capital. While the specific historical context of the 19th century has evolved, the fundamental dynamics of power and exploitation identified by Marx and Engels continue to be relevant. The Manifesto's call for the abolition of private property and its vision of a classless society, though controversial, represent a radical challenge to the status quo that has inspired movements for social change across the globe. Understanding the main arguments of the Communist Manifesto on its critique of the existing order provides crucial insights into the enduring debates about justice, equality, and the future of economic systems.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary critique of the existing social order presented in the Communist Manifesto?

The Communist Manifesto's primary critique of the existing social order is that it is fundamentally built upon class struggle, specifically the exploitation of the proletariat (working class) by the bourgeoisie (capitalist class).

How does the Manifesto describe the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat?

The Manifesto describes this relationship as one of inherent antagonism and exploitation. The bourgeoisie owns the means of production and extracts surplus value from the labor of the proletariat, who are forced to sell their labor power to survive.

What does the Manifesto mean by 'alienation' in relation to the worker?

Alienation, in the context of the Manifesto, refers to the worker being separated from the product of their labor, the process of labor, their own human potential, and fellow human beings due to the nature of capitalist production.

What role does private property play in the Manifesto's critique of the existing order?

Private property, specifically the private ownership of the means of production, is identified as the bedrock of bourgeois society and the source of class division and exploitation. The Manifesto advocates for its abolition.

How does the Manifesto argue that capitalism inherently creates its own gravediggers?

The Manifesto argues that capitalism, through its drive for profit and competition, constantly revolutionizes production, creates a larger and more concentrated proletariat, and generates crises that will ultimately lead to its downfall by the very class it exploits.

What is the Manifesto's critique of the existing political and legal systems under capitalism?

The Manifesto posits that the existing political and legal systems are not neutral but rather serve as instruments of the ruling bourgeoisie, designed to protect and perpetuate their ownership of the means of production and their power over the proletariat.

How does the Manifesto view the role of competition in capitalism?

The Manifesto views competition under capitalism as a destructive force that pits workers against each other, drives down wages, and leads to economic instability and crises, while also forcing the bourgeoisie to constantly innovate and expand.

What is the Manifesto's argument against the bourgeoisie's claim to represent universal interests?

The Manifesto debunks the bourgeoisie's claim to represent universal interests by arguing that their laws, morality, and general outlook are products of their class interests and are designed to maintain their dominance, not to benefit society as a whole.

How does the Manifesto critique the concept of the 'family' and 'education' within the bourgeois order?

The Manifesto critiques the bourgeois family as a capitalist institution based on money and property, and education as a tool of bourgeois indoctrination, aiming to create subservient workers rather than critical thinkers.

What is the ultimate outcome predicted by the Manifesto as a result of its critique of the existing order?

The ultimate outcome predicted is a proletarian revolution that will overthrow the bourgeoisie,

abolish private property, and establish a classless society, leading to the end of exploitation and alienation.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the main arguments of the Communist Manifesto on the critique of the existing order:

1.

The Specter of Capital: Understanding the Communist Manifesto

This book offers a contemporary analysis of the core tenets of the Communist Manifesto. It breaks down Marx and Engels' critique of capitalist society, focusing on their arguments about class struggle, alienation, and the inherent contradictions within the bourgeoisie. The author explores how these historical arguments remain relevant in understanding modern economic and social inequalities.

2.

Bourgeoisie and Proletariat: A Historical Materialist Lens

This work delves into the historical development of the bourgeoisie and proletariat as presented in the Communist Manifesto. It examines how Marx and Engels viewed the rise of capitalism as a revolutionary force that simultaneously created its own gravediggers. The book illuminates the central role of class conflict in driving historical change.

3.

Alienation in the Age of Automation

Drawing directly from the Communist Manifesto's critique of capitalist production, this book explores the concept of worker alienation in the context of modern technological advancements. It discusses how the division of labor and the commodification of human activity can lead to a sense of estrangement from one's work and self. The author argues that the manifesto's insights remain pertinent to understanding the human cost of relentless profit accumulation.

4.

The Myth of Progress: Capitalism's False Promises

This title examines the Communist Manifesto's argument that capitalist progress is inherently exploitative and unsustainable. It critiques the idea that capitalism solely benefits society, highlighting the exploitation of the working class and the inherent instability of the system. The book scrutinizes the social and environmental consequences often overlooked in narratives of capitalist advancement.

5.

Revolution from Above: The Historical Role of the Bourgeoisie

This book analyzes the Communist Manifesto's complex portrayal of the bourgeoisie as a class that, while revolutionary in its time, ultimately creates the conditions for its own downfall. It explores how the bourgeoisie broke feudal bonds and established a global market, yet also produced the conditions for proletarian revolution. The author traces this historical dialectic with a focus on the manifesto's revolutionary perspective.

6.

Private Property: The Root of Social Ills

This work directly confronts the Communist Manifesto's condemnation of private property as a foundational element of capitalist exploitation. It dissects how the concentration of private ownership leads to vast inequalities and the subjugation of the many by the few. The book argues that the manifesto's call for the abolition of private property stems from a deep critique of its societal impact.

7.

The Unseen Chains: Ideology and Class Consciousness

This title investigates the Communist Manifesto's understanding of how dominant ideologies serve to maintain the existing capitalist order. It explores the concept of false consciousness and how the ruling class shapes societal beliefs to perpetuate its power. The book examines the role of culture and ideas in preventing the proletariat from recognizing its own exploited condition.

8.

Global Capitalism and its Discontents

This book offers a critical perspective on the global expansion of capitalism, as foreshadowed in the Communist Manifesto. It examines how capitalism, in its drive for new markets, has created a world system characterized by interconnected exploitation. The author draws parallels between the manifesto's critique of nascent global capitalism and its contemporary manifestations.

9.

Towards a Classless Society: The Vision of Communism

This volume explores the positive vision put forth in the Communist Manifesto as a solution to the problems of capitalism. It outlines the communist ideal of a society free from exploitation and class divisions, where the means of production are collectively owned. The book aims to explain the radical restructuring of society envisioned by Marx and Engels.

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