

communist manifesto on mercantilism

The Communist Manifesto, a foundational text of Marxist thought, offers a trenchant critique of economic systems that preceded and indeed, shaped, the capitalist world it sought to dismantle. Among these, mercantilism stands out as a significant precursor, and understanding the Manifesto's perspective on mercantilism reveals crucial insights into its broader analysis of historical development and class struggle. This article delves into the intersection of the Communist Manifesto and mercantilism, examining how Marx and Engels viewed this early economic doctrine and its role in the rise of capitalism, and how their critique of mercantilism informs their revolutionary program. We will explore the historical context of mercantilism, its core tenets, and how the Manifesto identifies its limitations and inherent contradictions that paved the way for more advanced economic formations.

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The Communist Manifesto's Critique of Mercantilism

The Communist Manifesto, authored by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, provides a sweeping historical analysis of class struggle and economic systems. While its primary focus is on the critique of capitalism and the call for proletarian revolution, it inherently engages with the economic structures that preceded it, including mercantilism. Understanding the Manifesto's perspective on mercantilism is crucial for grasping its broader historical materialism and its critique of early forms of economic exploitation.

Understanding Mercantilism: The Historical Context

Mercantilism was the dominant economic theory and practice in Europe from the 16th to the 18th centuries. It was an era characterized by the rise of nation-states, colonial expansion, and the burgeoning of international trade. The core idea behind mercantilism was that a nation's wealth and power were best served by increasing exports and limiting imports, thereby accumulating precious metals, primarily gold and silver. This system viewed the global economy as a zero-sum game, where one nation's gain was another's loss.

Key tenets of mercantilism included:

- **Protectionism:** Imposing tariffs and quotas on imported goods to discourage foreign competition and protect domestic industries.
- **Colonialism:** Establishing colonies as sources of raw materials and captive markets for manufactured goods, enriching the colonizing power.
- **State Intervention:** Active involvement of the government in regulating trade, granting monopolies, and supporting domestic production through subsidies and bounties.
- **Accumulation of Bullion:** The primary goal was to increase the national stock of gold and silver, seen as the ultimate measure of wealth and power.
- **Favorable Balance of Trade:** Achieving an excess of exports over imports to ensure a net inflow of bullion.

Mercantilist policies were often implemented through legislation and trade agreements, aimed at strengthening the economic and military power of the nation-state. This system laid the groundwork for the eventual development of industrial capitalism, by fostering the accumulation of capital and the expansion of markets, albeit through state-driven and often exploitative means.

The Communist Manifesto's View on Mercantilism

While the Communist Manifesto does not dedicate extensive sections specifically to mercantilism as an independent economic system, its analysis of historical progression implicitly critiques its underlying principles and outcomes. Marx and Engels viewed historical epochs as defined by their modes of production and the resulting class relations. Mercantilism, in their framework, represented a transitional phase, a necessary although flawed, precursor to the dominance of industrial capitalism.

The Manifesto highlights how mercantilist policies, particularly those related to trade and colonial expansion, played a vital role in the initial accumulation of capital. This capital, generated through the exploitation of labor and resources, eventually fueled the industrial revolution. However, the Manifesto also identifies the inherent limitations of mercantilism, particularly its reliance on state intervention and protectionism, which it saw as eventually being superseded by the more dynamic and globally expansive forces of industrial capitalism.

The critique is subtle but present. The Manifesto emphasizes the revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie in breaking down feudal barriers and establishing a global market. Mercantilism, with its nationalistic focus and restrictive trade practices, was a system that the bourgeoisie, in its ascent, had to overcome to fully realize its economic potential. The unfettered pursuit of profit and the drive for industrialization necessitated the dismantling of mercantilist restrictions.

Mercantilism and the Rise of the Bourgeoisie

The Communist Manifesto places significant emphasis on the historical role of the bourgeoisie as the revolutionary class that overthrew feudalism and established capitalism. Mercantilism, in its historical context, was intrinsically linked to the rise of this new class and the consolidation of nation-states. The policies of mercantilism, while often benefiting monarchs and existing elites, also created opportunities for the burgeoning merchant class – the early bourgeoisie.

The expansion of trade, the establishment of chartered companies, and the protection of nascent industries all contributed to the accumulation of capital and the growth of a powerful merchant class. This class, driven by profit, increasingly chafed under the restrictions imposed by mercantilist regulations. The Manifesto points out how the bourgeoisie, in its pursuit of new markets and greater freedom of trade, was instrumental in breaking down the old order.

The accumulation of wealth through colonial exploitation and the establishment of favorable trade balances, hallmarks of mercantilism, provided the initial capital that would later be reinvested in manufacturing and industrial production. Thus, mercantilism, despite its inherent limitations and its ultimately superseded nature, served as a crucial, albeit often exploitative, stage in the development of capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie as the dominant economic and political force.

Critique of Mercantilist Policies in the Manifesto

The Communist Manifesto, in its critique of economic systems, implicitly targets the limitations and contradictions inherent in mercantilist policies. The Manifesto champions the unfettered development of productive forces and the creation of a global market, principles that stand in contrast to the protectionist and nationalistic tendencies of mercantilism.

The Manifesto argues that capitalism, through its inherent drive for expansion and innovation, inevitably breaks down national barriers and creates a globalized economy. Mercantilist policies, with their emphasis on tariffs, quotas, and protectionist measures, are seen as attempts to artificially contain this expansive tendency. The Manifesto, by advocating for the abolition of national distinctions and the establishment of a truly international working class, implicitly rejects the nationalistic economic framework of mercantilism.

Furthermore, the Manifesto highlights how capitalism, by abolishing guilds and feudal privileges, liberates labor and creates a more dynamic economic system. Mercantilism, with its reliance on monopolies and state-granted privileges, represented a continuation of older forms of economic control that the bourgeoisie eventually dismantled in its pursuit of pure profit. The critique is not about the exploitation within mercantilism, which was certainly present, but about its eventual inability to foster the full potential of industrial production and global trade.

The Transition from Mercantilism to Industrial Capitalism

The historical trajectory outlined in the Communist Manifesto illustrates a clear progression from

earlier economic systems to industrial capitalism. Mercantilism, with its focus on trade, accumulation of bullion, and state intervention, played a crucial role in this transition. It facilitated the initial accumulation of capital, the development of banking and credit systems, and the expansion of international trade networks, all of which were essential for the subsequent industrial revolution.

The Manifesto describes how the "discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape, opened up to the rising bourgeoisie afresh territory. The East Indian and Chinese markets, the colonization of America, the trade with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange and in commodities generally, gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry, an impulse never before known, and thereby, to the revolutionary element in the tottering feudal society, a rapid development." This passage implicitly acknowledges the role of mercantilist-era expansion in fostering the conditions for industrial capitalism.

However, the Manifesto also posits that the very success of mercantilism contained the seeds of its own destruction. The growing power of the bourgeoisie and the increasing efficiency of industrial production demanded freer markets, the removal of trade barriers, and the abolition of mercantilist monopolies. Industrial capitalism, with its emphasis on mass production, technological innovation, and the exploitation of wage labor, proved to be a far more dynamic and expansive system than mercantilism.

The transition was not a clean break but a complex evolution. Mercantilist policies were gradually dismantled or adapted as industrial capitalism asserted its dominance, driven by the relentless pursuit of profit and the expansion of global markets. The Manifesto sees this transition as a necessary step in the historical development of class society, leading to the full flowering of capitalist relations.

The Communist Manifesto's Legacy and Mercantilism

The enduring legacy of the Communist Manifesto lies in its incisive analysis of capitalism and its historical development, which implicitly includes its engagement with mercantilism. By tracing the evolution of economic systems, Marx and Engels provided a framework for understanding how capitalism emerged from earlier forms, including the mercantilist era. Their critique of capitalism, while focused on its inherent contradictions and exploitative nature, is built upon an understanding of the historical forces that shaped it.

The Manifesto's emphasis on globalization and the breaking down of national barriers can be seen as a direct challenge to the nationalistic underpinnings of mercantilism. While mercantilism sought to enrich individual nations through trade control, the Manifesto envisioned a world where national divisions would be transcended by class solidarity. The critique of protectionism and trade restrictions within mercantilism is echoed in the Manifesto's call for free trade as a tool that initially facilitated capitalist expansion and, in their view, ultimately exposed its own internal contradictions.

Understanding the Communist Manifesto's perspective on mercantilism helps to contextualize its broader arguments about the inevitability of capitalism's demise and the rise of communism. Mercantilism, as a system that relied heavily on state intervention and protectionism, was eventually outpaced by the relentless drive of industrial capitalism. The Manifesto argues that industrial capitalism, too, will be superseded, not by a return to protectionist policies, but by a fundamentally

different mode of production driven by collective ownership and the abolition of exploitation.

The historical analysis within the Manifesto, which touches upon the mercantilist era, serves to illustrate the dynamic and transformative nature of economic systems under capitalism. The proletariat, in the Manifesto's view, inherits a globalized economy forged through centuries of development, including the mercantilist era, and is destined to transform it into a communist society. The core takeaway is that each economic system, including mercantilism, plays a role in the historical unfolding of class struggle, ultimately leading towards the emancipation of the working class.

Conclusion: The Manifesto's Enduring Relevance to Mercantilist Legacies

The Communist Manifesto, while primarily a denunciation of industrial capitalism, offers critical insights into the economic systems that preceded it, including mercantilism. By examining the historical context and core tenets of mercantilism, we see how it served as a crucial, albeit limited, precursor to capitalism. The Manifesto implicitly critiques mercantilist protectionism and nationalistic trade policies as barriers to the full development of productive forces and the creation of a global market, which it saw as the historical mission of the bourgeoisie. The accumulation of capital, facilitated by mercantilist expansion and colonial exploitation, provided the necessary foundation for the industrial revolution. Ultimately, the Manifesto highlights the dynamic nature of economic systems, demonstrating how mercantilism's inherent limitations were overcome by the more expansive and revolutionary force of industrial capitalism, a system that, in turn, the Manifesto argued was destined for revolutionary overthrow by the proletariat.

Frequently Asked Questions

Did Marx and Engels specifically address mercantilism in the Communist Manifesto?

While the Communist Manifesto doesn't dedicate a specific section to mercantilism as a distinct economic system, it implicitly critiques its core principles through its broader analysis of capitalism and the historical development of class struggle. The Manifesto focuses on the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism.

How does the Communist Manifesto's critique of capitalism relate to mercantilist policies?

The Manifesto criticizes capitalism's inherent drive for constant expansion, accumulation of capital, and exploitation of labor. Mercantilist policies, with their focus on state intervention to promote national wealth through trade surpluses and accumulation of precious metals, can be seen as an earlier, less globally integrated form of capitalist accumulation, still reliant on extracting value.

What aspects of mercantilism would the Communist Manifesto likely find objectionable?

The Manifesto would likely object to mercantilism's emphasis on national competition, protectionism, and the state's role in fostering capitalist expansion, as these practices contribute to the division of the proletariat along national lines and obscure the underlying class conflict.

Can mercantilism be seen as a precursor to the capitalism the Manifesto critiques?

Yes, mercantilism is often viewed as a transitional economic system that laid the groundwork for industrial capitalism. It fostered the growth of a merchant class and the accumulation of capital, which were essential preconditions for the further development of capitalist production relations that Marx and Engels analyzed.

Does the Manifesto's call for the abolition of private property extend to mercantilist notions of national wealth?

The Manifesto calls for the abolition of bourgeois private property, which is property used for the exploitation of wage labor. Mercantilist notions of national wealth, often accumulated through state-sanctioned monopolies and colonial exploitation, would fall under the purview of this critique as they are tied to the broader capitalist system of production and accumulation.

How does the Manifesto's concept of internationalism contrast with mercantilist nationalism?

The Manifesto famously declares 'Workers of the world, unite!' advocating for international solidarity of the proletariat. This stands in direct opposition to mercantilism's inherent nationalism, which prioritizes the wealth and power of the individual nation-state, often at the expense of other nations.

Did Marx and Engels see mercantilism as a stage of historical development towards communism?

They viewed mercantilism as a stage in the development of capitalism, not directly on a path to communism. Communism, in their view, would arise from the contradictions and crises inherent in advanced industrial capitalism, not from earlier forms of state-directed economic activity.

Are there any parallels between the Manifesto's critique of bourgeois society and mercantilist justifications for state intervention?

The Manifesto critiques how bourgeois society uses state power to maintain its dominance and facilitate capitalist accumulation. Mercantilist policies, with their heavy reliance on state intervention (tariffs, monopolies, colonial expansion), can be seen as early examples of the state serving the interests of the emerging capitalist class, a dynamic the Manifesto thoroughly dissects.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to a hypothetical "Communist Manifesto on Mercantilism," along with their descriptions:

1.

The Chains of Commerce: A Communist Critique of Mercantilist Exploitation

This foundational text dissects the core tenets of mercantilism through a Marxist lens. It argues that mercantilist policies, driven by state-sanctioned accumulation and colonial subjugation, represent an early stage of capitalist exploitation. The book highlights how mercantilism inherently creates a global proletariat through the extraction of resources and labor from colonized territories.

2.

From Guilds to Global Markets: Mercantilism's Capitalist Genesis

This work traces the historical evolution from early mercantilist practices to the burgeoning global capitalist system. It identifies mercantilism's role in fostering nationalistic economic competition and the creation of exploitable labor pools. The author contends that the very structures built by mercantilism laid the groundwork for more sophisticated forms of commodity production and wealth concentration.

3.

The State as Capitalist: Mercantilism's Authoritarian Impulse

This book examines the inherent authoritarianism within mercantilist states. It argues that the state's direct intervention in the economy, while ostensibly for national benefit, ultimately serves to consolidate power and enforce the accumulation of capital for a select few. The text draws parallels between the state's control in mercantilist eras and later forms of state capitalism that suppress worker movements.

4.

Colonial Chains, Proletarian Cries: Mercantilism and the Global Working Class

This powerful analysis focuses on the human cost of mercantilist expansion. It details how mercantilist trade policies led to the brutal exploitation of indigenous populations and the forced labor of enslaved peoples across the globe. The book frames these historical injustices as direct precursors to the global class struggle that communism seeks to overcome.

5.

Navigating the Iron Laws: Mercantilism's Unintended Revolutionary Seeds

This title explores the inherent contradictions within mercantilism that ultimately sowed the seeds of revolution. It argues that the intense competition and resource disputes fostered by mercantilist policies, coupled with the growing economic disparities, created the fertile ground for socialist and communist thought. The book suggests that mercantilism's own rigid logic contained the elements of its eventual downfall.

6.

The Invisible Hand, The Visible Fist: Mercantilist Control and the Struggle for Liberation

This work contrasts the idealized notion of free markets with the reality of state-enforced mercantilism. It argues that mercantilist policies, far from being abstract economic principles, relied on coercion and military power to secure national advantage. The book advocates for a socialist alternative that prioritizes human liberation over state-driven accumulation and control.

7.

Beyond the Bullion: Mercantilism's Obsession with Wealth and the Neglect of the People

This book critically examines mercantilism's singular focus on accumulating precious metals and national wealth. It posits that this obsession blinded mercantilist thinkers and rulers to the fundamental needs and well-being of the working masses. The author asserts that a communist society, in contrast, would prioritize the equitable distribution of resources and the flourishing of all individuals.

8.

The Mercantilist Maze: Navigating State Power and Economic Control

This title delves into the complex and often contradictory policies implemented under mercantilism. It highlights how states attempted to regulate trade, foster domestic industries, and control colonial economies through a system of protectionism and monopolies. The book uses this analysis to illustrate the limitations of state-controlled economies and the potential for collective, worker-driven economic organization.

9.

Toward a Global Commonwealth: Mercantilism's Legacy and the Communist Horizon

This forward-looking book acknowledges the historical role of mercantilism in shaping global economic interactions. It then argues that the internationalist and exploitative nature of mercantilism necessitates a global communist solution. The author envisions a future commonwealth where

resources are shared equitably and the oppressive structures inherited from mercantilism are dismantled.

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