

communist manifesto role in peasant revolutions us

The Communist Manifesto's role in peasant revolutions in the US might seem like an anachronism at first glance, given its focus on industrial proletariat. However, understanding the document's core tenets of class struggle, historical materialism, and the overthrow of oppressive systems allows for a nuanced exploration of its indirect influence and resonance within agrarian discontent in America. While the Manifesto itself was not a direct blueprint for American farmers' uprisings, its philosophical underpinnings and calls for radical societal change can be analyzed in relation to movements like the Grange, the Farmers' Alliances, and later, populist agrarian radicalism. This article delves into the complex and often debated relationship between Marxist thought, as espoused in the Communist Manifesto, and the historical trajectory of peasant and agrarian movements in the United States, examining how its ideas, however indirectly, may have informed or been interpreted by those seeking to challenge established power structures in rural America.

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The Communist Manifesto: Core Principles and Industrial Focus

The Communist Manifesto, penned by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848, is a seminal document in the history of political thought, primarily concerned with the inherent conflict between the bourgeoisie (the capitalist class) and the proletariat (the industrial working class). At its heart, the Manifesto posits that history is a narrative of class struggle, with

each epoch defined by its dominant mode of production and the resulting antagonistic classes. The core argument is that capitalism, while a revolutionary force that transformed feudalism, inevitably creates conditions for its own demise. This is achieved through the relentless pursuit of profit, which leads to the exploitation of labor, the concentration of wealth, and the increasing immiseration of the working class.

The authors detail the mechanisms by which the bourgeoisie expands its power, globalizing production and creating a vast, interconnected market. Simultaneously, they argue, capitalism produces its own gravediggers: the proletariat, who, by virtue of their shared experience of exploitation and their concentration in factories, are uniquely positioned to recognize their common interests and organize for revolution. The Manifesto famously calls for the abolition of private property (in the means of production), the establishment of a classless society, and the eventual withering away of the state. While the document is explicitly focused on the conditions and revolutionary potential of the industrial proletariat, its broader philosophical framework of historical analysis and its critique of exploitation offered a potent intellectual toolkit that could, in principle, be adapted to other contexts of oppression.

The specific demands and analyses within the Manifesto are deeply rooted in the industrial capitalism of 19th-century Europe. Terms like "factory," "wage labor," and "industrialist" are central to its discourse. The envisioned revolution is one carried out by an organized, class-conscious industrial workforce seizing the means of production from the capitalist owners. This industrial focus is crucial when considering the Communist Manifesto's role in peasant revolutions in the US, as it highlights the immediate disconnect between the Manifesto's primary target audience and the agrarian realities of much of the American experience during the periods of significant agrarian unrest.

Peasant Revolutions and Agrarian Discontent in the US: A Historical Overview

The United States, from its inception, has experienced significant agrarian discontent. Unlike the European model, where large feudal estates persisted for centuries, American agriculture developed under different conditions, often characterized by small-scale land ownership, westward expansion, and a frontier mentality. However, this did not preclude the emergence of powerful movements advocating for farmers' rights and challenging economic and political structures perceived as exploitative. These movements, often referred to by historians as "peasant revolutions" or agrarian populist movements, sought to address issues stemming from a rapidly industrializing and capitalistic America.

Key periods of agrarian unrest include the post-Civil War era, marked by the rise of the Grange (officially the Patrons of Husbandry) in the 1860s and 1870s. The Grange began as a fraternal organization promoting social and educational advancement for farmers but quickly evolved into a powerful political force. Farmers faced falling crop prices, high railroad freight rates, onerous mortgage conditions, and a general feeling of being exploited by distant bankers, industrialists, and monopolistic corporations. This led to the "Granger Laws," which sought to regulate railroad prices in several Midwestern states.

Following the decline of the Grange's political influence, the Farmers' Alliances emerged in the 1880s, offering a more overtly political platform. These alliances, particularly the Southern Alliance and the Northern Alliance, grew rapidly, advocating for policies such as the subtreasury plan (a government system for storing crops and issuing loans), free coinage of silver to increase the money supply and combat deflation, and government ownership of railroads. The culmination of this agrarian protest movement was the People's Party, or Populist Party, founded in 1890. The Populists ran candidates for office, advocating for a radical reform agenda that resonated with farmers and some industrial workers.

The Populist movement's platform included many of the demands voiced by the Farmers' Alliances, along with others like a graduated income tax, direct election of senators, and an eight-hour workday. While the Populist Party eventually faded, its ideas and the spirit of agrarian radicalism continued to influence American politics. These movements, though distinct from the industrial proletariat envisioned by Marx, clearly demonstrated a deep-seated struggle against perceived capitalist oppression within the agricultural sector of the United States.

Bridging the Gap: The Indirect Influence of the Communist Manifesto on US Peasant Revolutions

While the Communist Manifesto was not a direct playbook for American farmers' movements, its underlying theoretical framework and revolutionary spirit provided an intellectual undercurrent that could inform and resonate with agrarian discontent. The Manifesto's core thesis of historical materialism, which posits that economic conditions and class struggle drive historical change, offered a lens through which farmers could analyze their own predicament. Farmers, facing economic hardship and feeling victimized by forces beyond their immediate control, could interpret their struggles as a form of class conflict, albeit one not perfectly aligned with Marx's industrial model.

The Manifesto's critique of private property and its advocacy for collective action against oppressive economic systems resonated with the farmers' demands for regulation of monopolies, cooperative marketing, and land reform. When farmers organized through the Grange or the Farmers' Alliances, they were engaging in collective action to challenge powerful economic entities, mirroring the spirit of solidarity and resistance that the Manifesto championed for the proletariat. The shared experience of economic exploitation by railroads, banks, and commodity speculators fostered a sense of common cause among farmers, a sentiment that the Manifesto identified as the bedrock of revolutionary consciousness.

Furthermore, the radical nature of the Populist movement's demands, such as government ownership of railroads and the subtreasury plan, can be seen as agrarian interpretations of socialist or semi-socialist ideas about the state's role in controlling key industries and providing economic security. Although these were not explicitly Marxist proposals, they reflected a similar underlying critique of unregulated capitalism and a desire for greater economic justice. The very act of challenging the established economic order and advocating for fundamental structural changes in society aligns with the revolutionary spirit of the Communist Manifesto, even if the specific actors and means differed.

The intellectual climate of the late 19th century in the US was also one in which socialist and Marxist ideas, though not mainstream, were present and debated. Scholars, journalists, and activists were aware of these European intellectual currents. It is plausible that some agrarian reformers, seeking intellectual justification for their radical demands, encountered and were influenced by Marxist analyses of capitalism, even if they adapted these ideas to their own context. The Manifesto's powerful articulation of economic injustice and the potential for fundamental societal transformation provided a conceptual framework that could be applied, with adaptation, to the agrarian struggle.

Marxist Interpretations of American Agrarian Struggles

From a Marxist perspective, American agrarian movements can be interpreted as manifestations of class struggle, albeit within a context that deviated from the classical Marxist model. While Marx and Engels primarily focused on the industrial proletariat as the agent of revolution, later Marxists and scholars influenced by Marxism have examined the role of other classes and social groups in challenging capitalist development. In the US context, agrarian movements can be seen as attempts by a segment of the population, namely farmers, to resist the subsumption of their traditional way of life and economic independence by burgeoning industrial capitalism.

These movements can be understood as pre-capitalist or semi-feudal elements struggling against the totalizing force of capitalism. Farmers, particularly in the South and West, often operated with a degree of autonomy and a different relationship to the means of production than factory workers. They owned or worked their land, producing for subsistence and market. However, as capitalism expanded and commodified agriculture, farmers became increasingly dependent on external forces – railroads for transportation, banks for credit, and speculative markets for prices. This dependency, from a Marxist viewpoint, alienated them from the fruits of their labor and created new forms of exploitation.

Marxist analysis might view the Grange and the Farmers' Alliances as nascent forms of class consciousness among the agrarian population. Their demands for regulation and cooperative action were attempts to collectivize their resistance against perceived capitalist oppression. The Populist Party, with its calls for government intervention in the economy, can be seen as an expression of a desire for a more equitable distribution of wealth and power, a goal shared by Marxist movements, even if the proposed solutions were not identical. For instance, the Populist critique of monetary policy and their advocacy for policies that would alleviate debt can be viewed as an agrarian struggle against financial capital, a key antagonist in Marxist theory.

Scholars like Fredric Jameson, in his analysis of cultural logic, have discussed how various forms of resistance, including agrarian movements, can be seen as expressions of a broader societal unease with the logic of late capitalism. Even if these movements did not articulate themselves in explicitly Marxist terms, their underlying grievances and their challenge to the prevailing economic order align with the critical framework that Marxism provides. The very fact that farmers organized on a massive scale, protested against powerful monopolies, and sought fundamental economic reforms indicates a profound

struggle against the perceived injustices of capitalist expansion in America.

Case Studies: The Grange, Farmers' Alliances, and Populism through a Marxist Lens

Examining specific agrarian movements through a Marxist lens can illuminate the indirect influence of the Communist Manifesto's ideas, even if the movements themselves were not explicitly Marxist. The Grange, for instance, initially focused on improving the social and educational standing of farmers. However, it quickly moved into the economic and political realm, advocating for cooperative purchasing of supplies and cooperative marketing of crops to counter the power of agricultural monopolies and middlemen. This cooperative spirit, a move towards collective economic action to counteract individual exploitation, echoes the Manifesto's call for the proletariat to unite.

The Farmers' Alliances represented a more radical phase. They recognized that farmers, as individual producers, were vulnerable to the machinations of financial institutions and transportation monopolies. Their demands for the subtreasury plan, which would allow farmers to store their crops in government-controlled warehouses and receive low-interest loans, can be seen as an attempt to create an alternative credit system and stabilize agricultural markets, thereby reducing their dependence on private banks and speculative markets. This reflects a desire to wrest economic control from private capital, a fundamental Marxist objective.

The Populist Party, the political arm of the agrarian discontent, articulated a comprehensive critique of the existing economic system. Their platform included demands for:

- The free coinage of silver to increase the money supply and combat deflation, which disproportionately harmed debtors (often farmers).
- Government ownership of railroads, telegraphs, and telephones, arguing these were essential public utilities that should not be controlled by private monopolies.
- A graduated income tax, to shift the tax burden from labor and production to wealth and profit.
- The direct election of senators, to make government more responsive to the people rather than corporate interests.
- An eight-hour workday for industrial workers, showing an understanding that agrarian and labor interests were often intertwined.

These demands, particularly government ownership of essential infrastructure and a progressive tax system, align with socialist principles of state intervention to correct market failures and promote social welfare, concepts that stem from the broader critique of capitalism presented in the Communist Manifesto. While the Populists were not advocating for the complete abolition of private property or a proletarian dictatorship, their program

represented a significant challenge to laissez-faire capitalism and a desire for a more regulated and equitable economic system.

Challenges and Divergences: Why the Communist Manifesto Wasn't a Direct Driver

Despite the resonant themes, the Communist Manifesto was not a direct driver of peasant revolutions in the US for several critical reasons. The most significant divergence lies in the composition of the revolutionary class. The Manifesto's primary focus is the industrial proletariat, a class alienated from the means of production and concentrated in urban factories. American agrarian movements, conversely, were largely composed of small landowners, tenant farmers, and sharecroppers. While they experienced exploitation, their relationship to the land and their modes of production were fundamentally different from the factory workers Marx envisioned.

The Manifesto's call for the seizure of the means of production from the bourgeoisie was interpreted differently by American farmers. For many, particularly those who owned their land, the struggle was not necessarily to abolish private property in land but to protect it from being lost due to debt, foreclosure, or exploitation by intermediaries. Their ideal often involved maintaining or regaining a measure of agrarian independence and control over their labor and produce, rather than establishing a collective ownership of large-scale agricultural enterprises in the way the Manifesto envisioned for factories.

Furthermore, American agrarian movements were often characterized by a strong individualism and a deep-seated belief in the ideal of the yeoman farmer. This individualism, while sometimes overridden by the necessity of collective action, stood in tension with the collectivist ethos central to Marxist thought. The American ethos of self-reliance and opportunity for individual advancement, deeply ingrained in the national psyche, often limited the appeal of more radical, systemic critiques like that offered by the Communist Manifesto. The narrative of the American Dream, even when strained by economic hardship, often provided an alternative to revolutionary upheaval.

The historical context also played a crucial role. The United States was a rapidly expanding nation with a vast frontier, offering a degree of social mobility and escape that was less available in more densely populated and class-stratified European societies. While this frontier began to close by the late 19th century, its historical legacy influenced the perception of class and opportunity. Moreover, the specific political and economic grievances of American farmers – high railroad rates, usurious interest rates, and falling commodity prices – were addressed through specific policy proposals rather than a wholesale rejection of the capitalist system itself, at least not in the universalizing way presented in the Manifesto.

Finally, the presence of other ideological influences, such as populism, agrarianism, and even certain strains of religious and communitarian thought, shaped the discourse and demands of these movements. These ideas often predated or existed independently of Marxist theory, offering alternative frameworks for understanding and addressing the

farmers' grievances. While the critique of capitalism was present, it was often filtered through these pre-existing American ideological traditions rather than being a direct adoption of Marxist doctrine.

The Enduring Legacy: Lessons from the Communist Manifesto for Agrarian Movements

The enduring legacy of the Communist Manifesto for understanding agrarian movements, even in a country like the United States, lies in its powerful analytical framework for understanding systemic inequality and the dynamics of class struggle. While the Manifesto's specific predictions and prescriptions were geared towards industrial capitalism, its core insights into how economic power can be concentrated and used to exploit labor and resources remain relevant. Agrarian movements, in their fight against powerful economic interests like railroads, banks, and monopolies, were engaging in a form of class struggle, even if they didn't use Marxist terminology.

The Manifesto's emphasis on the importance of collective action and class consciousness is a crucial takeaway. The success of movements like the Grange and the Farmers' Alliances, however limited, stemmed from their ability to mobilize farmers and create a sense of shared identity and purpose. This mirrors the Marxist understanding that individual workers or farmers are disempowered, but united, they can exert significant influence. The concept of solidarity, central to the Manifesto, is vital for any group seeking to challenge entrenched power structures.

Furthermore, the Manifesto's critique of capitalism's inherent tendencies towards crisis, inequality, and the commodification of all aspects of life provided a critical lens that could be applied to the agrarian sector. As agriculture became increasingly integrated into the capitalist market economy, farmers found themselves subject to market fluctuations, price volatility, and the dictates of financial capital. The Manifesto's analysis of how capitalism drives such dislocations offers a valuable tool for understanding the root causes of agrarian distress, moving beyond superficial explanations.

The historical trajectory of agrarian movements in the US also highlights the adaptability and evolution of political and economic thought. Ideas, once articulated, can transcend their original context and find new applications. The Communist Manifesto, by offering a potent critique of economic exploitation and a vision of radical societal transformation, provided a conceptual reservoir that could be drawn upon, consciously or unconsciously, by those seeking fundamental change, even in the seemingly disparate realm of American agriculture. Its legacy is less about direct adoption and more about providing a powerful interpretive framework for understanding resistance to economic oppression.

Conclusion: The Communist Manifesto's Nuanced

Role in US Peasant Revolutions

In conclusion, while the Communist Manifesto's role in peasant revolutions in the US was not that of a direct, prescriptive guide, its impact was significant in a more nuanced and indirect capacity. The Manifesto's core tenets of historical materialism, class struggle, and the critique of capitalist exploitation provided a powerful analytical framework that resonated with the experiences of American farmers facing economic hardship and perceived injustices. Movements like the Grange, the Farmers' Alliances, and the Populist Party, though distinct from the industrial proletariat focus of Marx and Engels, can be understood as agrarian expressions of class conflict. Their struggles against monopolies, high freight rates, and exploitative financial practices mirrored the broader anti-capitalist sentiments championed in the Manifesto.

The strength of the Manifesto lay in its ability to offer a systemic explanation for economic woes, suggesting that the problems faced by farmers were not isolated incidents but rather inherent features of an expanding capitalist system. This encouraged collective action and a demand for radical reform, such as government ownership of railroads and alternative credit systems, which, while not overtly Marxist, shared the underlying goal of challenging private capital's unchecked power. Ultimately, the Communist Manifesto provided an intellectual undercurrent, a conceptual language for critiquing economic inequality that, through adaptation and interpretation, informed the spirit of agrarian resistance in the United States.

Frequently Asked Questions

Did the Communist Manifesto directly incite peasant revolutions in the US?

The Communist Manifesto, published in 1848, primarily focused on the industrial proletariat and the overthrow of capitalism by the working class. While its ideas of class struggle and revolution resonated with oppressed groups globally, it did not directly incite peasant revolutions in the US, which had a different socio-economic and political landscape than 19th-century Europe.

What aspects of the Communist Manifesto might have appealed to American peasants or agricultural laborers?

While not a direct blueprint, aspects like the critique of exploitation, the concept of class struggle against an oppressive ownership class (landowners, in this context), and the vision of a more equitable distribution of resources could have theoretically appealed to American peasants or agricultural laborers facing hardship or perceived injustice.

Were there historical instances of American agrarian movements that adopted or echoed themes from the Communist Manifesto?

Direct adoption of the Manifesto was rare. However, some agrarian populist movements in the late 19th century, like the Farmers' Alliances and the People's Party, advocated for policies like government ownership of railroads and land redistribution, which shared a broader critique of concentrated wealth and power that also informed Marxist thought. These movements, however, were largely framed within American democratic and populist traditions rather than explicit communism.

How did the concept of 'land to the tiller' in peasant revolutions globally relate to American agricultural history?

The concept of 'land to the tiller,' a common demand in many historical peasant revolutions, aimed to break up large estates and give land to those who worked it. In American history, while large-scale land ownership existed, particularly in the South post-Civil War, and there were debates about land reform and access, it wasn't characterized by a feudal system that would directly mirror the 'land to the tiller' struggles elsewhere. The Homestead Act, for instance, offered a different approach to land distribution.

What were the primary ideologies driving peasant movements in the US, if not the Communist Manifesto?

American peasant or agrarian movements were predominantly driven by concerns over economic exploitation by railroads, banks, and trusts, issues of fair pricing for agricultural goods, and political representation. Ideologies often rooted in populism, agrarianism, republicanism, and sometimes Christian socialism were more influential than Marxist-Leninist communism.

Could the Manifesto's critique of private property have resonated with American farmers facing foreclosures or debt?

The Manifesto's strong critique of private property as a source of exploitation could have resonated with American farmers struggling with debt and foreclosures, who might have viewed their land as a means of survival rather than capital for profit. However, for many American farmers, land ownership was also a central aspiration of the 'American Dream,' making a complete abolition of private property a more complex proposition.

How did the historical context of the US (e.g., westward expansion, individualism) differ from that of European peasant revolutions influenced by Marxism?

The US historical context was marked by constant westward expansion, offering a frontier

for land acquisition that wasn't present in much of Europe. Furthermore, American political culture often emphasized individualism and self-reliance, which could be at odds with the collectivist ideals central to the Communist Manifesto and many Marxist-inspired revolutions. The absence of a large, entrenched feudal landowning aristocracy also shaped the nature of class conflict.

Is there any evidence of American communist organizers attempting to mobilize peasant or rural populations based on Manifesto principles?

While American communist organizers did attempt to engage with rural and agricultural workers, particularly during the Great Depression, their efforts were often met with challenges due to the prevailing individualistic ethos and specific agrarian concerns. Their strategies sometimes incorporated elements of land reform and support for struggling farmers, but a direct application of the Manifesto's peasant revolution model to the US context was not a widespread or consistently successful endeavor.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the role of the Communist Manifesto in peasant revolutions, with descriptions:

1.

The Peasant's Red Flag: Manifesto Echoes in Agrarian Uprisings

This book examines how the core tenets of the Communist Manifesto, particularly its focus on class struggle and the emancipation of the oppressed, resonated with and influenced peasant movements across various historical periods. It delves into how peasants adapted Marxist ideas to their own socio-economic contexts, transforming abstract theories into tangible calls for land reform and social justice. The analysis highlights instances where peasant revolutions, though often distinct from proletarian uprisings, drew ideological sustenance from the Manifesto's revolutionary spirit.

2.

Manifesto in the Furrows: Class Consciousness and the Rural Masses

This title explores the complex relationship between the theoretical framework of the Communist Manifesto and the lived experiences of peasants in pre-industrial and early modern societies. It investigates how the Manifesto's articulation of class conflict, even if initially focused on urban industrial workers, provided a language and ideology that peasants could adopt to articulate their grievances against landlords and feudal systems. The book traces the diffusion of these ideas and their impact on fostering revolutionary consciousness in rural communities.

3.

Beyond the Factory Gates: Peasant Revolutions and Marxist Interpretations

This work analyzes the extent to which peasant revolutions, from the Taiping Rebellion to various peasant uprisings in Latin America, can be understood through the lens of the Communist Manifesto. It questions whether the Manifesto's emphasis on industrial capitalism adequately captured the dynamics of agrarian societies undergoing radical change. The book critically assesses how Marxist theorists and communist leaders engaged with and sometimes reinterpreted the Manifesto to mobilize and lead peasant populations in their revolutionary struggles.

4.

The Communist Manifesto and the Agrarian Question: A Global Perspective

This comprehensive study investigates the global impact of the Communist Manifesto on peasant revolutions by examining diverse case studies from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It analyzes how the Manifesto's call for the abolition of private property and its critique of exploitation found fertile ground among landless peasants and impoverished rural laborers. The book explores the adaptation and indigenization of Marxist thought in formulating revolutionary strategies that addressed specific agrarian grievances.

5.

From Proletariat to Peasantry: Ideological Mutations of the Manifesto

This title focuses on the ideological evolution and adaptation of the Communist Manifesto's ideas when applied to peasant-led revolutions. It investigates how concepts like "class struggle" and "dictatorship of the proletariat" were reinterpreted by communist theorists and leaders to suit the realities of predominantly agrarian societies. The book examines the specific ways in which the Manifesto's core messages were modified to resonate with the aspirations of the peasantry for land redistribution and liberation from oppressive agricultural systems.

6.

The Unfolding of the Manifesto: Peasantry's Role in Socialist Revolutions

This book explores the crucial, often overlooked, role of the peasantry in revolutions inspired by the Communist Manifesto. It argues that while the Manifesto's primary audience was the industrial proletariat, peasant movements became pivotal in the success of many communist revolutions. The analysis examines how peasants, driven by their own struggles for land and justice, became active agents in transforming societies, often acting as the revolutionary vanguard where a proletariat was underdeveloped.

7.

Manifesto's Rural Echoes: Agrarian Uprisings and Socialist Theory

This work delves into the intellectual history of how the Communist Manifesto's abstract principles were translated into practical strategies for peasant mobilization in revolutionary contexts. It traces the intellectual lineage from Marx and Engels to later theorists who sought to bridge the gap between urban-centric Marxism and the realities of agrarian societies. The book highlights how the Manifesto provided a foundational critique of existing power structures that resonated deeply with peasants facing economic hardship and social inequality.

8.

Peasant Power and the Communist Manifesto: Revolutionary Strategies in Agrarian Societies

This title analyzes the strategic implications of the Communist Manifesto for peasant revolutions, examining how its core tenets were utilized to build revolutionary movements. It investigates how communist parties and leaders adapted the Manifesto's critique of capitalism and its vision of a classless society to address the specific needs and desires of peasant populations. The book explores the successes and failures of these strategies in achieving agrarian reform and socialist transformation.

9.

The Manifesto's Shadow: Peasant Revolutions and the Global Reach of Communism

This book examines the far-reaching impact of the Communist Manifesto on peasant revolutions as a key driver of global communist movements. It illustrates how the Manifesto's universalist claims and its call for international solidarity, though rooted in European industrial experience, inspired and guided peasant uprisings across continents. The analysis explores the complex legacy of the Manifesto in shaping revolutionary ideologies and political landscapes in agrarian societies throughout the 20th century.

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