

communist manifesto views on the state

The Communist Manifesto Views on the State

The Communist Manifesto, penned by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, presents a radical and enduring critique of capitalist society, with a significant portion dedicated to its views on the state. This foundational text argues that the state, far from being a neutral arbiter or a tool for the common good, is fundamentally an instrument of class oppression. Understanding the Communist Manifesto's perspective on the state is crucial for grasping the entirety of Marxist theory and its proposed solutions for societal transformation. The Manifesto contends that the state's primary function is to maintain the existing power structures and protect the interests of the ruling class, which in capitalism, is the bourgeoisie. This article will delve into the core tenets of the Communist Manifesto concerning the state, exploring its historical development, its role in perpetuating inequality, and its ultimate abolition in a communist society. We will examine how the Manifesto frames the state as a product of class struggle and how this understanding informs its vision for a future without class divisions and, consequently, without a state as we know it.

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The Communist Manifesto's Foundational Views on the State

The Communist Manifesto lays bare a scathing indictment of the state as it exists within class-divided societies. At its heart, the Manifesto posits that the state is not an independent entity serving all citizens but rather a direct manifestation and tool of the dominant economic class. In the era of bourgeois ascendancy, this dominant class is the bourgeoisie, the owners of the means of production. Consequently, the state's apparatus—its laws, its police, its military, its bureaucracy—is designed and employed to safeguard the property rights and economic interests of the bourgeoisie, often at the expense of the proletariat, the working class.

This perspective is rooted in the historical materialist approach championed by Marx and Engels. They viewed history as a progression driven by economic forces and the resulting class conflicts. Therefore, the state, they argued, emerged and evolved in tandem with these material conditions and class structures. The Manifesto succinctly states that "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." This famous quote encapsulates the Manifesto's core argument: the state's primary purpose is to serve the interests of the capitalist class, ensuring the smooth functioning of the capitalist mode of production and suppressing any threats to its dominance.

Historical Materialism and the Genesis of the State

The State as a Product of Class Antagonism

According to the Communist Manifesto, the state did not always exist. Its emergence is directly linked to the development of private property and the subsequent division of society into antagonistic classes. Before the advent of private property, in what Marx and Engels termed primitive communism, society was characterized by communal ownership and a relative absence of hierarchical structures. As productive forces developed and surplus emerged, the seeds of class division were sown. Those who gained control over the means of production began to exploit the labor of others, creating distinct social strata: the exploiters and the exploited.

The Manifesto argues that the state arose as a mechanism to manage and legitimize these new social divisions and the inherent conflicts they generated. It became the means by which the ruling class could maintain its dominance and ensure the continued extraction of surplus value from the labor of the subordinate classes. The state's power, therefore, is not inherent but derived from its role in upholding a specific economic system and the class relations that define it. The development of a specialized body of armed men, distinct from the general populace, served as the coercive arm of the ruling class, enforcing its will and suppressing dissent.

The Evolution of the State Through Historical Epochs

The Manifesto, through the lens of historical materialism, views the state as evolving alongside different modes of production. In feudal society, the state apparatus served the interests of the landowning aristocracy. With the rise of capitalism and the bourgeoisie, the nature of the state transformed, but its fundamental class character remained. The bourgeois state, with its emphasis on legal frameworks and seemingly impartial institutions, masked its underlying function of protecting

bourgeois property and facilitating the accumulation of capital. This evolution highlights the adaptability of the state apparatus to serve the dominant class, regardless of the specific economic system in place.

The State as an Instrument of Bourgeois Rule

A central tenet of the Communist Manifesto's view on the state is its characterization as the administrative machinery of the bourgeoisie. The Manifesto does not shy away from this assertion, positing that the laws, the judiciary, the police, and the military are all designed to reinforce the capitalist system and protect the privileges of the owning class. Even seemingly democratic states, according to the Manifesto, are ultimately instruments of bourgeois control, as the economic power of the bourgeoisie translates into political influence, shaping legislation and policy to their advantage.

The concept of the "common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" signifies that the state acts as a collective manager for the capitalist class. This includes maintaining public order in a way that facilitates commerce, enforcing contracts that bind laborers to employers, and protecting private property from any challenge. The Manifesto suggests that the state may present itself as a neutral arbiter or a protector of universal interests, but this is merely a facade. Beneath the veneer of legality and order lies the unvarnished reality of class-based exploitation.

The Legal Framework and Bourgeois Interests

The legal system, a cornerstone of the modern state, is scrutinized by the Manifesto as a primary tool for entrenching bourgeois interests. Laws related to property ownership, labor contracts, and inheritance are all designed to perpetuate the capitalist class structure. The Manifesto would argue that these laws, while appearing abstract and universal, are in practice tailored to benefit those who already possess capital. For instance, laws protecting private property are essential for the bourgeoisie to maintain their control over the means of production, and the state's enforcement of these laws

ensures that this control is not threatened.

The State's Role in Maintaining Capitalist Production

Beyond legal frameworks, the state actively participates in managing the conditions necessary for capitalist production. This can include investing in infrastructure, regulating markets (albeit often in ways that favor established capital), and even intervening in economic crises to prevent the collapse of the capitalist system. The Manifesto sees these actions not as altruistic endeavors but as measures to ensure the continued profitability and expansion of capital. The state's involvement in education, for example, can be viewed as producing a disciplined and skilled workforce amenable to capitalist employment.

The State's Role in Class Struggle

The Communist Manifesto frames the entire history of society as a history of class struggles. Within this framework, the state plays a pivotal and often antagonistic role. It is not merely a passive observer of these struggles but an active participant, invariably siding with the dominant class to suppress the aspirations and movements of the oppressed. The state's coercive apparatus is readily deployed to quell worker protests, dismantle labor unions, and punish any attempts to challenge the established economic order.

The Manifesto asserts that as class antagonisms sharpen, the state becomes more overtly a tool of repression. It is in such periods that the state's true nature as an instrument of class oppression is most evident. Rather than resolving these conflicts, the state's actions often exacerbate them, pushing society towards a revolutionary confrontation. The very existence of the state, in this view, is a testament to the irreconcilable nature of class interests within capitalist society.

Suppressing Proletarian Movements

The Manifesto specifically details how the state machinery is utilized to counter the growing power and organization of the proletariat. Strikes, protests, and calls for reform are met with police brutality, legal restrictions, and often, outright suppression. The state acts to protect the existing distribution of wealth and power, which is inherently unfavorable to the working class. By criminalizing collective action and prioritizing property rights over human rights, the state ensures that the proletariat remains in a subordinate position.

The State as a Battleground

While the Manifesto views the state as a tool of the bourgeoisie, it also acknowledges that the state can become a battleground for class conflict. The proletariat, as it develops its class consciousness and organizes itself into a political force, seeks to utilize or challenge the state's power. The Manifesto's call for communists to participate in political struggles, even within the existing bourgeois state, underscores this dual role of the state as both an instrument of oppression and a site where class power can be contested.

Critique of the "Universal Interest" Claim of the State

One of the most significant critiques leveled against the state by the Communist Manifesto is its claim to represent the "universal interest." The Manifesto vehemently rejects this notion, arguing that such claims are disingenuous and serve to mask the state's true class-based agenda. In any society divided into classes, the Manifesto contends, there cannot be a genuine universal interest because the interests of the ruling class are fundamentally opposed to those of the oppressed classes.

The state, by purporting to act for the common good, creates an illusion of impartiality. This illusion is

essential for maintaining social stability and legitimacy. However, Marx and Engels argue that the state's policies and actions invariably favor the dominant class, and any benefits that accrue to other classes are either incidental or designed to prevent broader discontent that might threaten the ruling order. The concept of the "general will" or "public good" is thus exposed as a bourgeois construct designed to legitimize class domination.

The Illusion of Neutrality

The Manifesto exposes the state's supposed neutrality as a carefully constructed myth. While liberal political thought often emphasizes the state's role as an impartial arbiter, the Manifesto argues that this is an impossibility in a class society. The very structure of the state, its funding, its personnel, and its historical origins are all tied to the maintenance of existing power relations. Therefore, its "neutrality" is always a neutrality that favors the status quo, which is inherently a bourgeois status quo.

How the State Serves Specific Class Interests

The Manifesto provides ample examples of how state policies serve specific class interests. Tax laws that disproportionately benefit capital, subsidies for industries controlled by the bourgeoisie, and the suppression of labor organizing are all presented as evidence of the state's class bias. The Manifesto argues that the state does not intervene to equalize wealth or opportunity but rather to ensure the continued accumulation of capital for the ruling class, even if this requires state intervention to stabilize or stimulate the economy.

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat: A Transitional State

The Communist Manifesto outlines a crucial transitional phase following the overthrow of capitalism:

the "dictatorship of the proletariat." This concept is often misunderstood and has been subject to extensive debate and misinterpretation. The Manifesto presents this not as a tyrannical regime in the conventional sense, but as a state apparatus controlled by the working class, specifically to dismantle the remnants of bourgeois power and begin the transition towards a classless society.

During this phase, the proletariat, having seized political power, would use the state to expropriate the bourgeoisie, collectivize the means of production, and suppress counter-revolutionary forces. The goal is to re-organize society on a new economic basis, one that eliminates exploitation and private ownership of the means of production. This transitional state is seen as necessary to overcome the resistance of the old ruling class and to pave the way for a society where such a state is no longer required.

Purpose and Function of the Transitional State

The primary purpose of the dictatorship of the proletariat is to facilitate the socialist revolution's consolidation and to prevent the restoration of capitalism. It involves a shift in class power, where the previously exploited class now holds state power. The Manifesto suggests that this would involve measures such as centralizing credit and transportation in the hands of the state and increasing the productive forces rapidly. It is a state that actively works to abolish its own basis of existence by eliminating class distinctions.

Relationship to Bourgeois Democracy

The Manifesto contrasts the dictatorship of the proletariat with bourgeois democracy. While bourgeois democracy, in its view, is a democracy for the few (the bourgeoisie), the dictatorship of the proletariat is a democracy for the many (the proletariat and its allies). It represents a radical expansion of democratic control, but it is a democracy exercised by the working class to achieve its revolutionary aims. The Manifesto does not advocate for perpetual rule by a single class but for a temporary state

that engineers its own obsolescence.

The Withering Away of the State in Communism

The ultimate aim of the communist revolution, as envisioned by the Communist Manifesto, is the establishment of a classless society. In such a society, where private property and class antagonisms have been abolished, the very conditions that necessitate the existence of a state would disappear. The Manifesto, echoing earlier socialist thought, predicts that the state, as an instrument of class oppression, would "wither away" or "die out."

In a fully communist society, there would be no ruling class to oppress and no oppressed class to be ruled. The functions currently performed by the state—administration, regulation, and defense—would transform into simple administrative tasks, managed by the community as a whole without the need for a coercive apparatus. The Manifesto's vision is of a society characterized by self-governance, free association, and the principle of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

Communism: A Stateless Society

The statelessness of communism is a direct consequence of the abolition of class. Without classes, there is no inherent conflict that the state would need to manage or suppress. The Manifesto envisions a society where collective well-being and cooperation are paramount, rendering the coercive and hierarchical structures of the state obsolete. This is the final stage of historical development, a transition from necessity to freedom, from class society to a free association of producers.

The Role of Administration vs. Governance

It is important to distinguish between "governance" and "administration" in the context of the communist ideal. While the state as a tool of class governance would cease to exist, administrative functions—the organization of production, the distribution of resources, the coordination of public services—would continue. However, these would be carried out by the community itself, through decentralized and democratic mechanisms, rather than by a specialized, centralized, and coercive state apparatus. The management of collective affairs would become a public function rather than a governmental one.

Comparing Manifesto Views with Other Political Philosophies

The Communist Manifesto's radical views on the state stand in stark contrast to many other political philosophies. While liberalism, for instance, often views the state as a necessary evil, a protector of individual rights and a guarantor of social order, and conservatism emphasizes the state's role in maintaining tradition and stability, Marxism, as articulated in the Manifesto, sees the state as inherently tied to class domination.

Anarchist philosophies, which also advocate for the abolition of the state, share this common ground with Marxism. However, anarchism generally rejects the Marxist concept of a transitional "dictatorship of the proletariat," preferring immediate and total abolition of the state. The Manifesto's nuanced approach, proposing a temporary state controlled by the working class, distinguishes it from more immediate forms of statelessness advocated by other radical traditions.

Liberalism and the Social Contract

Liberal political theory often grounds the legitimacy of the state in a social contract, where individuals consent to be governed in exchange for protection and the maintenance of order. The Manifesto implicitly rejects this notion, arguing that the consent of the governed is not freely given in a class-divided society, and the "protection" offered by the state primarily benefits the ruling class. The state,

in liberalism, is a neutral arbiter; in the Manifesto, it is a partisan.

Anarchism and the State

Anarchism, like the Communist Manifesto, critiques the state as an oppressive institution. However, anarchists typically advocate for the immediate abolition of the state, believing that any form of state, even a temporary workers' state, will inevitably lead to new forms of oppression. The Manifesto's proposal for a "dictatorship of the proletariat" represents a significant point of divergence, positing a necessary revolutionary stage where the working class seizes state power before its eventual dissolution.

Legacy and Modern Interpretations of the Communist

Manifesto's View on the State

The Communist Manifesto's views on the state have had a profound and lasting impact on political thought and movements throughout history. While the direct implementation of Marxist-Leninist states in the 20th century often led to authoritarian outcomes that diverged significantly from the Manifesto's ultimate vision of a stateless society, the core critique of the state as an instrument of class power continues to resonate.

Modern interpretations often focus on the Manifesto's analytical tools for understanding the relationship between economic power and political structures. Scholars and activists continue to debate the relevance of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in contemporary contexts and the feasibility of a truly stateless communist society. The Manifesto's critique remains a powerful lens through which to examine state actions, policies, and their impact on social and economic inequalities.

The State in Contemporary Society

Contemporary discussions about the state frequently engage with the Marxist critique, even if implicitly. Debates about corporate influence on government, the role of the state in managing economic crises, and the regulation of labor all touch upon the fundamental questions raised by the Communist Manifesto. The idea that the state serves specific economic interests, rather than a universal good, remains a potent critique in analyses of political economy and power dynamics.

Relevance of the "Withering Away" Concept

The concept of the state "withering away" is perhaps the most debated aspect of the Manifesto's view on the state. While few contemporary political movements explicitly advocate for its literal interpretation, the underlying idea that the state should evolve towards greater decentralization and less coercion as societal inequalities diminish remains influential in certain strands of socialist and post-capitalist thought. It serves as an aspirational goal for reducing the oppressive functions of the state.

Conclusion: The State in the Marxist Dialectic

In conclusion, the Communist Manifesto offers a powerful and enduring critique of the state, viewing it not as a neutral arbiter but as a product and instrument of class struggle. Rooted in historical materialism, the Manifesto argues that the state emerges with private property and class division, serving to protect the interests of the dominant class. In capitalist society, this means the state functions as an executive committee for the bourgeoisie, maintaining their economic and political power through legal frameworks, coercive apparatuses, and the suppression of proletarian movements. The Manifesto posits a transitional phase, the dictatorship of the proletariat, where the working class seizes state power to dismantle capitalist structures and prepare for a classless society. Ultimately, in

full communism, the state, stripped of its class function, is predicted to wither away, replaced by self-governance and administration for the common good. The Communist Manifesto's views on the state thus present a radical challenge to conventional political thought, emphasizing the deep entanglement of state power with economic relations and class conflict.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Communist Manifesto's ultimate view on the role of the state?

The Communist Manifesto views the state as an instrument of class oppression, serving the interests of the ruling class (historically, the bourgeoisie). Its ultimate aim is the abolition of the state as it currently exists, believing it will 'wither away' once class antagonisms are eliminated.

Does the Communist Manifesto advocate for the immediate destruction of the state?

No, the Manifesto doesn't call for the immediate destruction of the state. Instead, it proposes a transitional phase where the proletariat, after revolution, will establish a 'dictatorship of the proletariat.' This is seen as a necessary, albeit temporary, state apparatus to suppress counter-revolution and pave the way for a classless society where the state is no longer needed.

How does the Manifesto describe the state in a capitalist society?

In a capitalist society, the Manifesto describes the state as 'nothing more than the organized police force of the whole bourgeoisie for the repression of the proletariat.' It argues that the state's laws, administration, and military exist to maintain the property relations and power structures that benefit the capitalist class.

What will replace the state in the communist society envisioned by the Manifesto?

The Manifesto envisions the replacement of the state with a system of 'free association of producers.' In this classless, stateless society, the administration of public affairs will lose its political character and become a matter of simple management of common interests, rather than the exercise of power over people.

What specific measures does the Manifesto suggest the proletariat might use the state for during the transition?

The Manifesto outlines several measures the proletariat might employ the state for after seizing power, such as the expropriation of land rent, heavy progressive or graduated income tax, abolition of the right of inheritance, centralization of credit and means of communication in the hands of the state, and free education for all children in public schools.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Communist Manifesto views on the state, with descriptions:

1.

The Withering Away of the State: A Marxist Perspective

This book delves into the core Marxist concept of the state as an instrument of class oppression. It explores how, according to Marx and Engels, the eventual overthrow of capitalism would lead to a transitional socialist society where the state's functions would gradually diminish. The book analyzes the theoretical underpinnings of this "withering away" and its implications for a classless, communist future.

2.

Dictatorship of the Proletariat: Theory and Practice

Examining the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat," this title scrutinizes the transitional phase envisioned by the Communist Manifesto. It investigates the theoretical role of the proletariat in seizing state power and using it to suppress bourgeois resistance. The book also explores various historical attempts to implement this concept and the debates surrounding its actual application.

3.

Class Struggle and the Dawn of Communism

This work focuses on the central tenet of the Communist Manifesto: the driving force of history being class struggle. It analyzes how the inherent contradictions within capitalist societies, driven by the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, inevitably pave the way for a communist revolution. The book connects this historical materialism to the ultimate abolition of class distinctions and, consequently, the state.

4.

Beyond the Bourgeois State: A Revolutionary Blueprint

This title dissects the Communist Manifesto's critique of the existing bourgeois state, portraying it as a tool designed to protect the interests of the capitalist class. It outlines the revolutionary strategies proposed for dismantling this apparatus of oppression. The book further explores the envisioned alternative – a stateless, communist society where collective needs supersede individual exploitation.

5.

The Specter of Anarchy: Reinterpreting Statelessness in Marxism

Challenging common misconceptions, this book examines the Communist Manifesto's vision of a future without a state, often misconstrued as pure anarchy. It clarifies that this statelessness is not chaos but rather a highly organized, self-governing society based on communal administration and the absence of coercive governmental structures. The book highlights how social organization would arise from

collective will, not state decree.

6.

Communal Ownership and the End of the State Apparatus

This exploration focuses on the Manifesto's call for the abolition of private property and its replacement with communal ownership. It argues that this fundamental economic shift directly undermines the necessity for a state. The book illustrates how the elimination of private property removes the primary source of class conflict and the need for a repressive state apparatus to maintain it.

7.

The State as a Superstructure: Economic Foundations of Political Power

This title delves into the Marxist understanding of the state as part of the superstructure, determined by the economic base. It unpacks the Manifesto's argument that the political and legal systems of a society are shaped by its mode of production. The book shows how the transition to communism, by transforming the economic base, inherently leads to the obsolescence of the state.

8.

Revolutionary Transition: From State Control to Collective Self-Governance

This book analyzes the crucial period of revolutionary transition described in the Communist Manifesto. It discusses how the proletariat, after seizing power, would manage the transition from a state-controlled economy to one managed by the collective. The text explores the methods and challenges involved in dismantling the old state structures and building new forms of social organization.

9.

Engels's Legacy: The State in the Communist Future

Drawing heavily on Friedrich Engels's contributions, particularly "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State," this work elaborates on the communist view of the state's historical development and eventual demise. It explains how societal evolution, from primitive communalism through class-divided societies, necessitates a detailed understanding of the state's role. The book reinforces the idea that communism represents the ultimate resolution of state power.

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