

communist manifesto what it says

The Communist Manifesto, a seminal work co-authored by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, remains one of the most influential political documents in history. Understanding what the Communist Manifesto says is crucial for grasping the historical development of socialist thought and its impact on global politics and economics. This document, penned in 1848, outlines a revolutionary ideology that critiques capitalism and proposes a radical societal transformation. We will delve into the core tenets of the manifesto, exploring its analysis of class struggle, the critique of the bourgeoisie, and the envisioned future of a classless society. By examining its key arguments, readers can gain a comprehensive insight into the historical context and the enduring relevance of what the Communist Manifesto says.

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What the Communist Manifesto Says: A Core Analysis

At its heart, what the Communist Manifesto says is a powerful and systematic critique of capitalist society

and an impassioned call for revolutionary change. The document is structured to systematically dismantle the prevailing economic and social order, highlighting its inherent contradictions and advocating for a new system based on communal ownership and the abolition of private property. It argues that history is fundamentally shaped by class struggle, a concept central to understanding its analysis. The manifesto identifies the bourgeoisie, the class that owns the means of production, and the proletariat, the working class that sells its labor, as the primary antagonists in this historical drama.

The authors meticulously detail how the bourgeoisie, through its relentless pursuit of profit and expansion, has transformed society, creating unprecedented wealth but also perpetuating widespread exploitation and alienation. They contend that capitalism, while historically progressive in its ability to develop productive forces, ultimately creates conditions ripe for its own downfall. The manifesto outlines a historical trajectory, arguing that the proletariat will inevitably rise up, overthrow the bourgeoisie, and establish a classless society where the means of production are owned collectively. This new society, according to the manifesto, will be characterized by the absence of exploitation, alienation, and the state as a tool of oppression.

Furthermore, what the Communist Manifesto says about the future involves a series of transitional measures aimed at consolidating the power of the proletariat and dismantling the remnants of capitalism. These measures, while specific to the mid-19th century context, illustrate the practical steps envisioned by Marx and Engels for moving towards communism. The document concludes with a powerful exhortation to the workers of the world to unite, recognizing their shared interests and their potential to forge a new historical epoch.

The Historical Context of The Communist Manifesto

To truly comprehend what the Communist Manifesto says, it is essential to understand the historical milieu in which it was written. Published on the eve of the widespread revolutions of 1848 across Europe, the manifesto was a product of intense social and political upheaval. The Industrial Revolution had profoundly reshaped societies, leading to the rapid growth of cities, the rise of a new industrial working class (the proletariat), and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a new capitalist class (the bourgeoisie).

This period was marked by stark inequalities, harsh working conditions, and a general sense of disenfranchisement among the working classes. Existing political systems, largely dominated by aristocratic or bourgeois interests, offered little relief. In this fertile ground of discontent and intellectual ferment, various socialist and utopian ideas were circulating, seeking to propose alternative societal models. Marx and Engels, influenced by German philosophy, French socialism, and British political economy, sought to provide a more scientific and materialist analysis of historical development and class relations.

They were also responding to the fragmented and often idealistic nature of earlier socialist movements,

aiming to forge a more unified and militant working-class political movement. The League of Communists, an international association of working men, commissioned Marx and Engels to draft a program that would clearly articulate their aims and principles. Thus, what the Communist Manifesto says is not just a philosophical treatise but also a political program intended to mobilize and guide the burgeoning international labor movement.

Central Tenets of The Communist Manifesto

The Communist Manifesto is built upon several foundational ideas that collectively form its revolutionary doctrine. Understanding these core tenets is key to deciphering what the Communist Manifesto says. The most prominent of these is the theory of historical materialism, which posits that economic factors, specifically the mode of production and the relations of production, are the primary drivers of historical change and societal development.

Another crucial tenet is the concept of class struggle. Marx and Engels famously declared, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." They argued that throughout history, societies have been characterized by conflicts between oppressors and oppressed classes, such as master and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, and, in their time, bourgeoisie and proletariat. This perpetual conflict, they believed, was the engine of historical progress, leading to either the revolutionary reconstitution of society or the common ruin of the contending classes.

The manifesto also strongly advocates for the abolition of private property, particularly the private ownership of the means of production. This is not a call for the confiscation of personal belongings but a demand for the collectivization of factories, land, and other resources that are used to generate wealth and employ labor. They argued that private property, in the context of capitalism, is the instrument by which the bourgeoisie exploits the proletariat.

Finally, a central aim outlined in what the Communist Manifesto says is the establishment of a classless society, where the distinctions between social classes are abolished. In such a society, the state, which they viewed as an instrument of class oppression, would eventually wither away. The ultimate goal is a society of equals, characterized by communal ownership and the absence of exploitation and alienation.

The Critique of the Bourgeoisie and Capitalism

A significant portion of what the Communist Manifesto says is dedicated to a scathing critique of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist system they represent. Marx and Engels acknowledge the historically revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie, recognizing that it had shattered feudal bonds, created unprecedented productive forces, and revolutionized the world. However, this admiration is swiftly followed by a

denunciation of its inherent exploitative nature and its destructive consequences.

The manifesto argues that the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and therefore the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. This incessant drive for expansion leads to the creation of a global market, the subjugation of agrarian countries to the capitalist ones, and a relentless pace of change that destabilizes everything. This dynamism, while productive, is also seen as a source of immense social cost.

The core of their critique lies in the concept of surplus value. They contend that the bourgeoisie, by owning the means of production, extracts surplus value from the labor of the proletariat. Workers are paid a wage that is less than the value they create, with the difference constituting the profit for the capitalist. This creates an inherent exploitation, where the wealth of the few is built upon the impoverishment and alienation of the many.

Furthermore, what the Communist Manifesto says highlights how capitalism generates crises of overproduction. The drive to maximize profit leads to the production of more goods than can be consumed by the market, resulting in periodic economic downturns, unemployment, and social misery. These crises, the manifesto asserts, are not accidental but are intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production and further demonstrate its unsustainability. The bourgeoisie, in its pursuit of profit, has unleashed forces it can no longer control.

Class Struggle: The Driving Force of History

The concept of class struggle is arguably the most central and enduring idea within what the Communist Manifesto says. Marx and Engels present a dialectical view of history, where the progression of societies is not a linear march of progress but a series of conflicts driven by the inherent antagonisms between different social classes. They identify these classes based on their relationship to the means of production.

In the feudal era, the struggle was between the lord and the serf. With the advent of capitalism, this dynamic shifted to the bourgeoisie, who own the factories, land, and machinery, and the proletariat, who own nothing but their labor power, which they must sell to the bourgeoisie to survive. The manifesto argues that the bourgeoisie, in its rise to power, historically played a revolutionary role, overthrowing the feudal aristocracy. However, once in power, the bourgeoisie becomes the oppressor class.

The manifesto posits that the very development of capitalism inherently creates and expands the proletariat. As industry grows, more workers are drawn into the factories. At the same time, capitalism concentrates capital into fewer hands, leading to the impoverishment and dispossession of small capitalists and artisans, who are also pushed into the ranks of the proletariat. This growing and increasingly unified working class, despite its initial disorganization and internal divisions, is seen as the agent of historical

change.

The proletariat, according to what the Communist Manifesto says, is the only truly revolutionary class because its struggle against the bourgeoisie is a struggle for its own emancipation, which will ultimately lead to the emancipation of all oppressed classes. Unlike previous ruling classes that sought to maintain their position, the proletariat, by abolishing private property and class distinctions, aims to create a society where no class is dominant, thus ending class struggle itself.

The Role of the Proletariat and Revolution

Central to what the Communist Manifesto says is the pivotal role assigned to the proletariat as the revolutionary class destined to overthrow capitalism and usher in a new era. The manifesto details how the proletariat, due to its position within the capitalist system, is uniquely positioned to effect this transformation. Workers are alienated from the products of their labor, from the process of labor itself, from their fellow workers, and from their own human potential, or "species-being." This collective experience of exploitation and alienation fosters a sense of solidarity and a shared interest in radical change.

The manifesto outlines a process by which the proletariat will become increasingly class-conscious. Through their struggles against individual capitalists and the capitalist system, workers develop a collective identity and a realization of their common interests. They organize into trade unions, engage in strikes, and eventually develop political organizations to challenge bourgeois power. The growth of industry, while brutal for the workers, also facilitates this process by concentrating them in factories and cities, making communication and organization easier.

The communist revolution, as described in what the Communist Manifesto says, is not merely an uprising but a fundamental restructuring of society. It involves the seizure of political power by the proletariat, which will then use this power to expropriate the bourgeoisie and socialize the means of production. This transition is seen as inevitable, driven by the internal contradictions of capitalism and the growing power and consciousness of the proletariat. The ultimate goal of this revolution is not to replace one ruling class with another but to abolish class rule altogether.

The manifesto distinguishes communists from other working-class parties by their understanding of the movement as a whole and their advocacy for the international solidarity of the proletariat. Communists represent the interests of the movement in its entirety and are considered the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country. Their aim is to achieve the ultimate purpose of the communists, which is the abolition of all class distinctions and the establishment of a communist society.

Proposed Measures for a Communist Society

Beyond its analysis and critique, what the Communist Manifesto says also outlines a series of transitional measures that communists would implement upon seizing power to transition from capitalism to communism. These measures are presented in the section titled "Proletarian and Communist Policy" and are intended to dismantle the foundations of bourgeois society and establish the framework for a new one. It is important to note that these were presented as measures applicable to the most advanced countries at the time of writing, and their specific application would vary.

These proposed measures 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.
- Centralization of credit in the hands of the state, by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly.
- Centralization 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., &c.

These points, while specific to the historical context, illustrate the fundamental principle of increasing state control over economic and social life during the transitional phase. The ultimate goal, as reiterated in what the Communist Manifesto says, is the abolition of these very measures once the classless society is fully established, leading to the "free development of each" as the "condition for the free development of all."

The Specter of Communism: Overcoming Objections

A significant part of what the Communist Manifesto says involves preemptively addressing and refuting the common criticisms and fears directed at communism by the ruling classes of its time. The opening statement famously declares that "a spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism." This highlights the widespread fear and misunderstanding surrounding communist ideas, which the bourgeoisie actively propagated.

The manifesto systematically debunks several common accusations. For instance, it addresses the charge that communists want to abolish altogether the person who works for himself. The authors clarify that communists aim to abolish the "personal property" of the bourgeois, the property that enables them to exploit the labor of others, not the property of the peasant or artisan. They emphasize that the work of the proletariat is not their own property but rather a means to sustain themselves.

Another objection addressed is the accusation that communism abolishes individuality, freedom, and culture. What the Communist Manifesto says in response is that bourgeois society, with its relentless pursuit of profit, creates a society where individuals are reduced to mere instruments of production, and their individuality is stifled. Communism, by abolishing exploitation and class dependence, will actually unleash true individuality and a richer culture accessible to all, not just the privileged few. They argue that the "freedom" of the bourgeois is the freedom to exploit, and the "culture" they value is the culture of the ruling class.

Furthermore, they tackle the criticism that communism destroys family ties, national distinctions, and eternal truths. They argue that bourgeois society, with its economic basis, has already undermined traditional family structures and national loyalties in favor of monetary relationships. Communism, they contend, by establishing communal care for children and a more equitable society, will actually strengthen genuine human bonds. The idea of "eternal truths" and "universal morality" is dismissed as a product of existing class relations, and communists aim to create a more humane and just basis for morality.

The Lasting Impact and Relevance of What the Communist Manifesto Says

The enduring legacy of what the Communist Manifesto says is undeniable, even centuries after its publication. It has inspired revolutionary movements, shaped political ideologies, and profoundly influenced economic and social thought worldwide. The manifesto's core concepts, such as class struggle, historical materialism, and the critique of capitalism, have become foundational to socialist and Marxist analysis and continue to be debated and reinterpreted in contemporary contexts.

The manifesto's call for the international solidarity of the working class resonated deeply throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, contributing to the formation of labor unions, socialist parties, and international workers' organizations. While the specific predictions of the manifesto regarding the inevitable collapse of capitalism in advanced industrial nations have not unfolded exactly as envisioned, its analysis of capitalism's inherent tendencies towards inequality, crisis, and exploitation remains a powerful lens through which to examine contemporary economic issues.

Many of the social and economic transformations that have occurred globally can be traced, in part, to the intellectual and political currents stirred by what the Communist Manifesto says. Issues like workers' rights, welfare states, progressive taxation, and the critique of corporate power all echo themes present in the manifesto. Even critics of communism often engage with its ideas, acknowledging its intellectual rigor and its impact on historical events.

In conclusion, understanding what the Communist Manifesto says is not just an academic exercise but a gateway to understanding a significant portion of modern history and contemporary socio-economic discourse. Its powerful rhetoric, its analytical framework, and its revolutionary vision continue to provoke thought and inspire debate about the nature of society, economy, and justice.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of The Communist Manifesto

In summation, what the Communist Manifesto says is a profound and historically significant document that continues to resonate in contemporary discussions about economics, politics, and social justice. It provides a detailed critique of capitalism, identifying class struggle as the primary engine of historical change. The manifesto meticulously outlines the exploitative relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, arguing for the inevitable rise of the working class to overthrow the existing order.

The proposed transitional measures and the vision of a classless society, where the means of production are collectively owned, offer a radical alternative to capitalist society. The document also effectively preempts and refutes common criticisms leveled against communism, framing it as a force for true human emancipation. The lasting impact of what the Communist Manifesto says is evident in its influence on numerous revolutionary movements, political ideologies, and ongoing debates about societal fairness and economic systems. Its enduring relevance lies in its incisive analysis of power, inequality, and the potential for societal transformation, making it a cornerstone text for understanding the forces that have shaped the modern world.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central argument of The Communist Manifesto?

The central argument is that throughout history, society has been defined by class struggle, with the bourgeoisie (the capitalist class) exploiting the proletariat (the working class). It posits that this exploitation will inevitably lead to a proletarian revolution, resulting in a classless, communist society.

What does The Communist Manifesto say about the role of the bourgeoisie?

The Manifesto argues that the bourgeoisie, through industrialization and capitalism, has revolutionized production and created immense wealth. However, it also states that this progress has come at the cost of creating a vast, impoverished proletariat whose labor is exploited.

What are the key demands or proposals made by Marx and Engels in the Manifesto?

While not a detailed policy document, the Manifesto lists several measures intended to be introduced after the proletariat seizes power. These include the abolition of property in land, a heavy progressive or graduated income tax, abolition of all right of inheritance, and centralization of credit and means of communication and transport in the hands of the state.

How does The Communist Manifesto view the family and religion?

The Manifesto controversially states that communists intend to abolish the bourgeoisie family, viewing it as based on capital and private property. It also criticizes religion as an 'opium of the people,' seeing it as a tool used by the ruling class to placate and control the oppressed.

What is the concept of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as described in the Manifesto?

The Manifesto proposes a transitional phase after the revolution where the proletariat, as the ruling class, would use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state, and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible.

What does The Communist Manifesto predict about the future of capitalism?

Marx and Engels predicted that capitalism contains the seeds of its own destruction. They argued that the inherent contradictions of capitalism, such as overproduction and the increasing immiseration of the proletariat, would lead to its inevitable collapse and replacement by communism.

What is the famous concluding line of The Communist Manifesto, and what does it signify?

The famous concluding line is "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working Men of All Countries, Unite!" This serves as a powerful call to action, emphasizing the shared interests of the global working class and their potential to overthrow capitalist systems.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the Communist Manifesto and its core ideas, with descriptions:

1.

The Communist Manifesto: A Graphic Novel Adaptation

This visually engaging adaptation translates the dense prose of Marx and Engels into a dynamic graphic novel format. It aims to make the historical context and revolutionary ideas of the Manifesto more accessible to a modern audience. Through vivid illustrations and concise dialogue, it captures the essence of class struggle, capitalism's critique, and the vision of a communist society. This version is ideal for those new to the text or seeking a fresh perspective on its core arguments.

2.

Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1

While the Manifesto outlines the political aims, Capital delves deeply into the economic mechanisms that Marx believed fueled capitalist exploitation. This foundational work meticulously dissects the concepts of value, surplus value, and the inherent contradictions within capitalism. It provides the economic underpinnings for the Manifesto's critique of the bourgeoisie and its arguments for worker emancipation. Understanding Capital is crucial for grasping the theoretical framework behind the Manifesto's revolutionary call to action.

3.

The Condition of the Working Class in England

This pioneering sociological study by Friedrich Engels offers a stark, empirical account of the harsh realities faced by the proletariat during the Industrial Revolution. It details the abysmal living and working conditions, the rampant poverty, and the social degradation experienced by the working masses. Engels's firsthand observations directly informed the analysis presented in the Communist Manifesto, illustrating the human cost of capitalist accumulation and the need for fundamental societal change. The book serves as powerful evidence for the Manifesto's claims about class oppression.

4.

What is to Be Done?

Written by Vladimir Lenin, this influential pamphlet outlines his vision for the organization and strategy of a revolutionary socialist party. While not directly a restatement of the Manifesto, it addresses the practical challenges of translating Marxist theory into revolutionary action. Lenin emphasizes the need for a disciplined vanguard party to lead the proletariat and seize state power. It represents a significant development in Marxist thought regarding the implementation of the Manifesto's goals in the context of early 20th-century Russia.

5.

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

In this historical analysis, Karl Marx examines the political events in France following the 1848 revolution, focusing on the rise of Louis Bonaparte. He applies his theory of historical materialism to understand how class forces and their representations played out in a specific political context. The book demonstrates how the bourgeoisie, despite its revolutionary potential, can be prone to internal divisions and susceptible to authoritarian figures. This work provides a nuanced example of applying the analytical tools foreshadowed in the Communist Manifesto to real-world political transformations.

6.

The German Ideology

This collaborative work by Marx and Engels presents a comprehensive critique of German philosophy and lays out their materialist conception of history. It further develops the idea that economic relations and the mode of production are the primary drivers of historical change and social consciousness. The book elaborates on the concept of ideology as a tool used by the ruling class to maintain its power, a theme central to the Manifesto's critique of the established order. It offers a deeper theoretical foundation for understanding how class consciousness, or the lack thereof, shapes historical outcomes.

7.

The State and Revolution

Written by Vladimir Lenin, this work elaborates on Marxist theory regarding the nature of the state and the necessity of a proletarian revolution to overthrow it. Lenin draws heavily on Marx and Engels's writings, including the Communist Manifesto, to argue that the state is an instrument of class oppression. He outlines the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" as a transitional phase towards a stateless communist society. The book serves as a theoretical guide for the revolutionary seizure of power, directly addressing the Manifesto's call for the proletariat to organize itself as the ruling class.

8.

Why I Am Not a Christian

While Bertrand Russell's collection of essays is not directly about communism, his philosophical inquiries into morality, religion, and societal structures resonate with the secular and humanistic underpinnings often associated with Marxist thought. Russell questioned traditional authority and advocated for reason and empirical evidence, mirroring the Manifesto's critique of institutions that uphold class power. His pursuit of a more rational and just society aligns with the emancipatory spirit of the Communist Manifesto, albeit through different philosophical avenues.

9.

The Civil War in France

This influential work by Karl Marx offers an analysis of the Paris Commune of 1871, the first instance of a workers' government. Marx viewed the Commune as a practical realization of some of the political principles outlined in the Communist Manifesto. He celebrated its attempts to dismantle the bourgeois state apparatus and establish a new form of democratic self-governance. The book examines the successes and failures of this revolutionary experiment, providing historical context for the Manifesto's vision of a transformed political landscape.

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