

communist manifesto influence on political economy us

The specter of communism, once a driving force for revolutionary change globally, continues to cast a long shadow over contemporary political economy, particularly within the United States. While the United States stands as a bastion of capitalism, the foundational ideas presented in the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels have undeniably influenced American political discourse, economic policy debates, and societal structures in ways often overlooked. This article delves into the multifaceted communist manifesto influence on political economy in the US, exploring how its critiques of capitalism, its analysis of class struggle, and its vision of social change have permeated American thought and practice. We will examine the historical context of these influences, the specific areas where Marxist-inspired ideas have taken root, and the ongoing relevance of these concepts in understanding contemporary economic challenges and policy solutions in the United States.

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Understanding the Core Tenets of the Communist Manifesto

The Communist Manifesto, published in 1848, remains a seminal text in understanding historical materialism and the critique of capitalist society. At its heart, the Manifesto argues that history is a series of class struggles. Marx and Engels posited that the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class, has historically played a revolutionary role by dismantling feudalism, but in doing so, it has created its own antithesis: the proletariat, the working class. The fundamental conflict, according to the Manifesto, lies in the exploitation of labor by capital, where the bourgeoisie extracts surplus value from the proletariat's work. This exploitation, they argued, is inherent to the capitalist system and leads to alienation, economic crises, and increasing inequality.

Class Struggle as the Engine of History

A central thesis of the Communist Manifesto is that "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." This assertion frames societal development not as a linear progression but as a dynamic process driven by the inherent antagonisms between social classes. In the context of 19th-century industrial capitalism, Marx and Engels identified the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) and the proletariat (wage laborers) as the primary antagonistic classes. They argued that the bourgeoisie's pursuit of profit necessitates the constant exploitation of the proletariat, creating a fundamental power imbalance and a perpetual source of conflict. This understanding of class struggle has profoundly influenced how many in the United States have analyzed social and economic inequalities.

Critique of Exploitation and Alienation

The Manifesto extensively details the exploitative nature of capitalism, arguing that workers receive only a fraction of the value they create. This surplus value is appropriated by the capitalists as profit. Furthermore, Marx and Engels introduced the concept of alienation, suggesting that under capitalism, workers become estranged from the products of their labor, the process of labor itself, their fellow workers, and their own human potential. This alienation stems from the commodification of labor and the worker's lack of control over the means of production and the fruits of their efforts. These critiques resonate with ongoing discussions in the US about worker satisfaction, fair wages, and the dehumanizing aspects of certain labor practices.

The Inevitability of Revolution and the Abolition of Private Property

The Manifesto famously calls for the abolition of private property in the means of production, arguing that it is the foundation of capitalist exploitation and class division. They envisioned a transition to communism, a classless society where the means of production are owned collectively, and resources are distributed according to need. This radical proposal has been a focal point of opposition and misunderstanding regarding communist influence. However, it's crucial to distinguish between the Manifesto's ultimate goals and the specific reformist and regulatory measures adopted by various political movements in the US that drew inspiration from its critiques.

Historical Reception and Early Influences in the US

The arrival of Marxist ideas in the United States coincided with significant industrialization and periods of intense labor unrest. While the US was largely built on principles of individual liberty and free-market capitalism, the stark realities of early industrial capitalism—long hours, dangerous working conditions, low wages, and widespread poverty—created fertile ground for radical ideologies. Socialist and anarchist movements, often drawing heavily on Marxist analysis, gained traction among immigrant populations and segments of the native-born working class. These early movements, though often fragmented and facing significant societal and political opposition, laid the groundwork for later discussions and reforms that bore the imprint of communist thought.

The Spread of Socialist and Anarchist Movements

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, various socialist parties and labor organizations emerged in the US. These groups, influenced by Marx and Engels, sought to organize workers, advocate for better working conditions, and challenge the power of industrial capitalists. While not all socialists were communists, the broader socialist movement often incorporated Marxist critiques of capitalism and calls for collective action. Anarchist groups, while differing on the role of the state, also shared a common critique of capitalist exploitation and advocated for radical societal transformation. The vibrant debates and activism of this era demonstrate an early, albeit often contested, communist manifesto influence on American political economy.

Opposition and Repression: The Red Scares

The influence of communist ideas in the US has always been met with strong opposition, often manifesting in periods of intense anti-communist sentiment and repression, known as the Red Scares. Following World War I and again during the Cold War, fears of communist infiltration and subversion led to widespread suspicion, surveillance, and persecution of individuals and groups perceived as radical or communist sympathizers. This often included labor leaders, intellectuals, and activists who advocated for social and economic reforms that echoed some of the critiques found in the Communist Manifesto. The resulting climate of fear and repression undoubtedly stifled the open adoption of overtly Marxist policies but did not entirely erase the underlying critiques of capitalism that these movements championed.

The Communist Manifesto's Impact on Labor Movements and Workers' Rights

Perhaps the most direct and enduring communist manifesto influence on political economy in the US can be seen in the labor movement and the fight for workers' rights. The Manifesto's analysis of class struggle and the exploitation of the proletariat provided a powerful theoretical framework for labor organizers seeking to empower workers and challenge the unchecked power of employers. The fundamental goals of the labor movement—fair wages, reasonable working hours, safe working conditions, and the right to collective bargaining—are all, in essence, demands for a more equitable distribution of the value created by labor and a reduction in the exploitative power of capital,

directly addressing themes central to Marx and Engels' critique.

Advocacy for Collective Bargaining and Unionization

The concept of class consciousness, central to the Manifesto's call for workers to unite, directly informed the strategy of forming labor unions. Unions emerged as a collective force for workers to negotiate with employers from a position of greater strength. The right to form unions and engage in collective bargaining, a cornerstone of modern labor law, can be seen as a practical application of the Manifesto's call for the proletariat to organize against the bourgeoisie. This struggle for union recognition and power has been a defining feature of American economic history, reflecting a persistent tension between capital and labor rooted in the very dynamics described by Marx and Engels.

The Fight for the Eight-Hour Day and Improved Working Conditions

The demand for an eight-hour workday, a rallying cry of the early labor movement, directly challenged the relentless pursuit of profit by capitalists who sought to maximize labor extraction. The Communist Manifesto implicitly supported such demands as steps toward alleviating exploitation. The ongoing efforts to improve workplace safety, establish minimum wage laws, and regulate working hours are all legacies of a broader movement advocating for a more humane and less exploitative labor system. These reforms, while often achieved through gradual political processes rather than revolution, directly address the inequalities and hardships that Marx and Engels identified as inherent to capitalism.

Influence on American Economic Policy Debates

While overt adoption of communist policies has been rejected in the US, the intellectual legacy of the Communist Manifesto has undeniably shaped debates surrounding economic policy. The critiques of capitalist inequality, the concentration of wealth and power, and the potential for economic crises have spurred discussions and policy interventions aimed at mitigating these perceived flaws. Many New Deal programs and subsequent social welfare initiatives, while not explicitly socialist, were influenced by a recognition of the need to address widespread economic distress and to regulate the excesses of capitalism, ideas that resonated with or were inspired by Marxist analyses.

Critiques of Monopoly Capitalism and Wealth Inequality

The Manifesto's prediction that capitalism would lead to the concentration of capital in fewer hands has been a recurring theme in American economic discourse. Concerns about monopolies, trusts, and the growing disparity between the rich and the poor echo the concerns raised by Marx and Engels. Debates over antitrust legislation, progressive taxation, and wealth redistribution policies often draw upon arguments that highlight the perceived inherent tendency of capitalism to generate significant economic inequality. The language used to describe these issues—terms like

"exploitation," "class division," and "concentration of power"—can be traced back to the theoretical framework provided by the Communist Manifesto.

The Role of Government Regulation and Social Safety Nets

The Manifesto's argument that the state, under capitalism, is an instrument of the ruling class has paradoxically led to a focus on the state's potential to act as a counterbalancing force. As a response to the perceived failures and injustices of unregulated capitalism, movements inspired by socialist and Marxist thought have pushed for greater government intervention. This has manifested in demands for social safety nets, public education, unemployment benefits, and public healthcare. While these are often framed within a social democratic or liberal capitalist context, the underlying impetus to curb capitalist excesses and provide a basic standard of living for all citizens reflects a significant communist manifesto influence on American political economy.

Critiques of Capitalism and Their Echoes in US Discourse

The enduring power of the Communist Manifesto lies in its incisive critique of capitalism's inherent contradictions and its tendency to generate social and economic problems. These critiques, even when debated and modified, have become deeply embedded in various strands of American political and economic thought. The recognition of capitalism's potential for crises, its impact on the environment, and its tendency to create social stratification continues to fuel reformist and progressive movements in the United States.

The Problem of Recurring Economic Crises

Marx and Engels famously described capitalism's cyclical nature, predicting periods of boom and bust. The Manifesto outlined how the inherent drive for profit and overproduction would lead to economic instability. The history of the United States is punctuated by significant economic downturns, from the Panics of the 19th century to the Great Depression and the 2008 financial crisis. While economists offer various explanations for these crises, the Marxist framework provides a persistent lens through which to understand the systemic vulnerabilities of capitalist economies, influencing discussions about economic regulation and stability.

Commodification of Labor and Life

A key critique in the Manifesto is the transformation of labor into a commodity, bought and sold in the market. This idea extends to the broader concern about the commodification of various aspects of life under capitalism, from education and healthcare to culture and even human relationships. In the US, debates about the privatization of public services, the rising cost of higher education, and the influence of corporate interests on media and politics can be seen as manifestations of concerns about the pervasive reach of capitalist commodification, a theme deeply rooted in the Communist Manifesto's analysis.

Class Struggle and Social Stratification in the American Context

While American identity often emphasizes individualism and opportunity, the concept of class struggle and social stratification, as articulated in the Communist Manifesto, remains a relevant framework for understanding societal dynamics. The stark realities of income inequality, wealth concentration, and differing access to resources in the United States suggest that class remains a significant factor in shaping life outcomes, despite the prevailing narrative of a classless society. The Manifesto's analytical tools help illuminate these persistent patterns.

The Persistence of Income and Wealth Disparities

Data consistently shows significant gaps in income and wealth in the US, with a disproportionate amount of wealth concentrated in the hands of a small percentage of the population. This stratification directly aligns with the Marxist concept of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, where ownership of capital confers significant economic and political power. Discussions about the "1%," the decline of the middle class, and the struggles of low-income workers often utilize language and analytical frameworks that are deeply indebted to the class analysis presented in the Communist Manifesto, even if the terms used are different.

Access to Opportunity and Social Mobility

The Manifesto suggests that the capitalist system inherently limits opportunities for the working class, trapping them in a cycle of exploitation. While the American dream narrative emphasizes upward mobility, studies often reveal significant barriers to social mobility based on socioeconomic background. Factors such as access to quality education, healthcare, and social networks are strongly correlated with a family's economic status, indicating that class plays a considerable role in determining an individual's life chances. This reality provides a continuing point of reference for the critiques of capitalist inequality first laid out by Marx and Engels.

Socialism, Social Democracy, and the Legacy of Marxist Ideas

The influence of the Communist Manifesto on political economy in the US is not monolithic. It has manifested in various forms, from more radical socialist movements to the more moderate, reformist approaches of social democracy. While the US has historically shied away from explicit calls for communist revolution, the underlying critiques of capitalism and the desire for a more equitable society have fueled the adoption of policies and ideas that share common roots with Marxist thought, albeit often within a capitalist framework.

The Evolution of Socialist Thought in the US

Over time, socialist movements in the US have evolved. While early socialist parties often aligned more closely with Marxist-Leninist principles, later iterations have embraced democratic socialism and social democracy. These movements advocate for significant government intervention in the economy to address inequality, provide social services, and regulate corporations, but within a democratic political system and with a mixed economy rather than outright state ownership of all means of production. This evolution demonstrates how Marxist critiques have been adapted and reinterpreted to fit the American political context.

Social Democratic Policies and Their Marxist Underpinnings

Many policies championed by American progressives and social democrats share common goals with the aspirations outlined in the Communist Manifesto, albeit pursued through different means. The establishment of a robust social safety net, including Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, can be seen as efforts to mitigate the harshness of capitalist insecurity and provide a basic level of economic security for all citizens. Similarly, support for public education, environmental regulations, and progressive taxation reflects a desire to temper the unfettered power of capital and promote greater social equality. These policies, while not communist, address the very issues of exploitation and inequality that the Manifesto identified.

The Communist Manifesto's Influence on Social Welfare Programs

The creation and expansion of social welfare programs in the United States, while often framed as pragmatic responses to social problems or as essential components of a mixed economy, bear the indelible mark of critiques similar to those found in the Communist Manifesto. The recognition that unfettered capitalism can lead to widespread hardship and insecurity has prompted the development of systems designed to provide a safety net and a degree of economic security for citizens, echoing the Manifesto's concern for the well-being of the proletariat.

From New Deal to the Great Society

The New Deal programs of the 1930s, enacted in response to the Great Depression, represented a significant departure from laissez-faire capitalism. Policies like Social Security, unemployment insurance, and various public works projects were designed to alleviate poverty, stimulate the economy, and provide a basic level of economic security. These initiatives, while capitalist in nature, were influenced by a broader societal discourse that acknowledged the need for government intervention to correct market failures and address social inequalities, a discourse in which Marxist critiques played a role. The Great Society programs of the 1960s further expanded the social welfare state, aiming to combat poverty and racial injustice.

Debates Over the Welfare State and Economic Justice

Contemporary debates about the scope and funding of social welfare programs in the US frequently touch upon underlying principles related to economic justice and the distribution of resources. Arguments for expanding access to healthcare, affordable housing, and education, or for a more robust social safety net, often implicitly or explicitly draw on the idea that society has a collective responsibility to ensure a basic standard of living and opportunities for all citizens, regardless of their socioeconomic status. This perspective aligns with the Marxist concern for collective well-being and the critique of capitalist systems that can leave segments of the population behind.

Academic and Intellectual Currents Shaped by Marxist Thought

Beyond direct policy interventions, the Communist Manifesto has profoundly influenced academic disciplines and intellectual discourse in the United States. Fields such as sociology, economics, political science, history, and literary criticism have seen significant contributions from scholars working within or engaging with Marxist frameworks. These intellectual currents have shaped how many Americans understand their society, its economic structures, and its historical development.

Sociology and the Study of Inequality

Sociology, in particular, has been deeply influenced by Marxist theory. The concept of class, power, and social stratification remains central to sociological inquiry. Scholars use Marxist analytical tools to examine social mobility, the role of ideology in maintaining social structures, and the impact of economic systems on social relationships and institutions. The study of inequality in the US, from its racial and gender dimensions to its economic manifestations, owes a significant intellectual debt to the foundational work of Marx and Engels.

Economics and Critical Analysis of Capitalism

While mainstream neoclassical economics has largely diverged from classical Marxism, critical economics and heterodox economic schools of thought continue to engage with Marxist analysis. These approaches often focus on issues of power, exploitation, economic crises, and the social and environmental consequences of capitalism. Debates within economics regarding the distribution of income, the nature of labor markets, and the effectiveness of financial regulation often draw upon or implicitly respond to the critiques of capitalism first articulated in the Communist Manifesto.

Influence on Historical and Cultural Studies

Marxist historical analysis, which emphasizes the role of economic forces and class conflict in shaping historical events, has influenced how American history is understood. Similarly, in cultural studies, Marxist approaches have been used to analyze the role of ideology, media, and popular culture in reinforcing or challenging existing power structures. The understanding of American history and culture often involves grappling with the persistent tensions between capitalist

development, class divisions, and movements for social change, all themes deeply explored in the Communist Manifesto.

Contemporary Relevance: Applying Manifesto Concepts to Modern US Political Economy

Even in the 21st century, the concepts introduced in the Communist Manifesto retain a surprising degree of relevance for understanding the complexities of the modern US political economy. While the specific predictions of global communist revolutions have not materialized as envisioned, the underlying critiques of capitalism—its tendencies towards inequality, its susceptibility to crises, and its impact on the working class—continue to resonate with contemporary challenges.

The Gig Economy and New Forms of Labor Exploitation

The rise of the gig economy and non-traditional employment arrangements in the US presents new manifestations of issues that Marx and Engels identified. Concerns about precarious work, lack of benefits, and the power imbalance between platform companies and individual workers echo the Marxist analysis of the commodification of labor and the exploitation of workers. The debate over worker classification, benefits, and fair compensation in this new economic landscape is a modern iteration of the historical struggle for workers' rights.

Globalization, Automation, and the Future of Work

Globalization and automation are transforming the nature of work in the United States, raising questions about job displacement, wage stagnation, and the future of the capitalist labor market. The Manifesto's observation that capitalism revolutionizes the means of production and constantly seeks to reduce the cost of labor, including through technological advancements, offers a framework for understanding these contemporary shifts. Discussions about universal basic income, retraining programs, and the social impact of automation can be seen as responses to the economic challenges amplified by capitalist dynamics.

Environmental Degradation and Capitalism

While not a central focus of the original Communist Manifesto, later Marxist thinkers and contemporary critical analyses have increasingly linked capitalist imperatives for endless growth and profit accumulation to environmental degradation. The relentless pursuit of economic expansion often comes at the expense of ecological sustainability. The growing concern in the US about climate change and the need for sustainable economic practices can be viewed through a critical lens that questions the inherent environmental consequences of capitalist production, a critique that finds resonance with the broader call for a different societal organization.

Conclusion: The Unseen Threads of Communist Manifesto Influence

The enduring communist manifesto influence on political economy in the US is a complex and often understated aspect of American history and contemporary society. While the United States has staunchly defended its capitalist system and largely rejected overt communist political structures, the foundational critiques of capitalism, class struggle, and exploitation presented by Marx and Engels have permeated American thought and policy debates. From the early labor movements fighting for basic workers' rights and the eight-hour day to the ongoing discussions about wealth inequality, the regulation of monopolies, and the provision of social welfare programs, the intellectual legacy of the Communist Manifesto is undeniably present. It has provided a critical lens through which to examine the inherent tensions within capitalism, prompting reforms and shaping discourse in ways that continue to influence the direction of American political economy. Understanding these influences is crucial for a comprehensive grasp of the nation's economic development and its ongoing pursuit of a more just and equitable society.

Frequently Asked Questions

How did the Communist Manifesto's critique of capitalism influence early American labor movements and their demands?

The Communist Manifesto's core arguments about class struggle, exploitation of labor, and the concentration of wealth resonated with early American labor activists. It provided a theoretical framework for understanding their grievances and fueled demands for better wages, shorter working hours, and the right to organize unions, shaping the broader discourse around workers' rights in the U.S.

In what ways did the perceived threat of communist ideology, inspired by the Manifesto, shape American economic policy and regulations in the 20th century?

The fear of communism, heavily influenced by Marxist thought as articulated in the Manifesto, led to significant policy shifts in the U.S. This included the implementation of social welfare programs (like Social Security and unemployment insurance) to counter socialist appeals, increased government regulation of industries, and the establishment of anti-communist measures during the Cold War, all aimed at demonstrating capitalism's superiority and preventing the spread of communist ideas.

Has the Communist Manifesto's analysis of globalization and the interconnectedness of economies had any discernible impact on discussions about American economic policy in the

era of global markets?

While not always explicitly cited, the Manifesto's early observations on the global reach of capitalist markets and the dissolution of national economic barriers prefigure modern discussions about globalization. Its critique of international trade and its impact on labor can be seen as an intellectual precursor to contemporary debates in the U.S. surrounding trade agreements, outsourcing, and the economic consequences of global supply chains.

How has the Communist Manifesto's concept of alienation of labor informed critical perspectives on the modern American workplace and consumer culture?

The Manifesto's concept of alienation, where workers become detached from the products of their labor and their own creative potential under capitalism, continues to inform critiques of modern work. This includes discussions about repetitive tasks, lack of autonomy, and the commodification of human experience in the U.S., as well as how consumerism can create artificial needs and further alienate individuals.

To what extent has the historical struggle against communism in the U.S., largely framed by anxieties stemming from ideas in the Communist Manifesto, influenced debates about income inequality and social mobility today?

The legacy of the anti-communist movement, which was deeply rooted in opposition to the principles outlined in the Communist Manifesto, has indirectly shaped contemporary discussions on income inequality. While the overt fear of communism has waned, the underlying concerns about class stratification and economic disparities that Marx and Engels highlighted remain central to policy debates in the U.S., influencing proposals for wealth redistribution, progressive taxation, and access to education and healthcare.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the influence of the Communist Manifesto on political economy in the US, with descriptions:

1.

Capital and Ideology

This seminal work by Thomas Piketty examines the historical evolution of wealth and income inequality across different societies, including the United States. It delves into how ideologies, including those inspired by Marxist thought and its critiques of capitalism, have shaped economic policies and power structures. The book provides a broad historical lens to understand the ongoing debates about wealth distribution and the role of the state in the economy.

2.

The Road to Serfdom

Friedrich Hayek's classic argument contends that central planning and government intervention in the economy, often associated with socialist and communist ideas, inevitably lead to the erosion of individual liberty and the rise of totalitarianism. He critiques the economic collectivism advocated in works like the Communist Manifesto, arguing it sacrifices economic efficiency and personal freedom. The book remains a foundational text for free-market economic thought in the US.

3.

What Is to Be Done?

While Vladimir Lenin's original work focused on the organization of a revolutionary party, its underlying analysis of capitalist exploitation and the need for radical change resonated with American labor movements and radical thinkers. Later interpretations and discussions within the US often debated the practical application of Lenin's organizational strategies and Marxist economic critiques. This title reflects the ongoing American grappling with the practicalities of achieving a more equitable economic system.

4.

The Affluent Society

John Kenneth Galbraith's influential book challenged the prevailing American focus on private sector growth and consumerism, arguing for a greater emphasis on public goods and social welfare. While not directly Marxist, it critiques the limitations of unfettered capitalism and suggests that societal needs are often neglected in favor of private accumulation. The book sparked debates about the direction of American economic policy and the role of government in addressing social problems.

5.

The Communist Manifesto: A Graphic Novel Adaptation

This accessible adaptation brings the core ideas of Marx and Engels to a modern audience through visual storytelling. It highlights the Manifesto's critique of capitalist exploitation, class struggle, and the predicted rise of the proletariat. The graphic novel format allows for a re-examination of these foundational concepts in the context of contemporary American economic debates about inequality and worker power.

6.

The End of History and the Last Man

Francis Fukuyama's controversial thesis posits that the fall of communism and the triumph of liberal democracy marked the "end of history" in terms of ideological evolution. He analyzes the enduring appeal and perceived superiority of Western capitalist democracy. The book offers a counterpoint to Marxist predictions and explores the trajectory of political and economic systems in the post-Cold War era, a significant context for understanding the lasting impact of communist ideas.

7.

No Logo

Naomi Klein's exploration of branding and corporate power critically examines the excesses of consumer capitalism and the homogenization of culture. While not explicitly focused on Marxist theory, it echoes the Manifesto's critique of capitalism's exploitative nature and its tendency to alienate individuals. The book resonates with American concerns about corporate influence and the distribution of power in the marketplace.

8.

The Spectacle of the Society

Guy Debord's critique of modern capitalist society focuses on how social life is dominated by images and commodities, creating alienation and passivity. His ideas, rooted in Marxist analysis, challenge the superficiality of consumer culture. The book offers a framework for understanding how capitalist ideology, in its American manifestation, shapes perceptions and masks underlying economic inequalities.

9.

Class Struggle in the United States

This title suggests a book that directly analyzes the historical and ongoing manifestations of class conflict within the American economic system. It would likely examine how the core concepts of class antagonism and exploitation, central to the Communist Manifesto, have played out in American labor relations, political movements, and economic policy debates. The book would explore the persistent relevance of Marxist analytical tools for understanding American political economy.

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